Parallel Lines

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Characters:	Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok, Lee "Gumayusi" Min-hyeong, Ryu "Keria" Min-seok, Moon "Oner" Hyeon-joon, Choi "Zeus" Woo-je, Jeong "Chovy" Ji-hoon, Kim "Peyz" Su-hwan, Kim "Canyon" Geon-bu, Kim "Kiin" Gi-in, Son "Lehends" Si-woo
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Parallel Lines

by Salted_Honey

Summary

In a world where people are born with tattoos of the first sentence their soulmate says to them, Jihoon is cursed with a devastatingly plain tattoo that says nothing but “Hello, it’s nice to meet you.”

The only consolation, however, is that the words are written in abrasively bright rainbow script.

Notes

This is version B of the soulmate AU! Because it was originally the same concept as "Fate Sealed", there will be similar plot points but otherwise everything will be brand new! The contents of this story aren't fully set in stone yet(mostly still deciding how much mature content it will have), but this one should be on the longer side! I hope you enjoy c:

Chapter 1

“AND GENG WILL BE YOUR LCK 2024 SPRING CHAMPIONS!”

The roaring cheer washed over them at full force as they took their headsets off. The air was warm with excitement and the floor seemed to thrum with energy as they walked forwards to take a bow. Everything was a blur as Jihoon approached the trophy yet again. He could feel bodies pushing and jostling around him as the rest of his teammates crowded around to reach for the pedestal.

Finally letting himself smile, he reached out to touch the trophy. He could feel the impatience as his teammates waited in anticipation for Siwoo to count down before they hoisted the trophy all together. The stage lights glinted off the silver planes of the trophy. The proof of their achievement. Excitement. Happiness. Joy.

Hello, it’s nice to meet you.

Jihoon pulled back his hand like he was burned. The silvery euphoria of the moment turned cold as he quickly pulled the sleeve of his shirt, which had slid downwards when he lifted the trophy, back over the cursed words burned onto his shoulder. His heart was pounding for all the wrong reasons now. Did anyone see? They couldn’t have.

How did he always forget? How did he always let himself forget? Everytime, without fail, the same thing happens: He lets himself get swept away in the joy and excitement and lifts the trophy just a little bit too high, just a little bit too quickly.

At this point it felt like the universe was taunting him. Out of everything in the world, it was the action of lifting the trophy that always threw those words back in his face. It felt like a curse he was branded with. No matter how much people praised him and called him special, those words were the universe’s reminder that he wasn’t as special as he thought he was and he would never be.

His teammates' excitement faded into background noise as they all piled into their van. Jihoon rubbed at his shoulder, taking a deep breath. Today was supposed to be a celebration. He couldn't bring down his teammates' moods by spiraling. He smiled and asked the others what they wanted for dinner.

~

The crowd was cheering again. The world around him was a blur of bright white from the blinding stage lights. The lights shone so brightly that he couldn't even see his teammates around him. A silhouette approached him, visible even through the glaring light. Jihoon squinted in an attempt to see the person's face but his efforts were in vain. Even as the person approached him, not a single discernable feature was visible.

This annoyed Jihoon. For some reason it seemed important. He needed to see this person's face. He didn't know why it was important but he was certain it was. The person continued to approach him and he found his body moving automatically and without his permission. He made a small bowing gesture and bumped his fist against that of an invisible person. He did it again even though he was sure there was no one standing in front of him.

Then it was the person that was real. The important person that he couldn't see. He bowed and touched their knuckles together in a moment that was all too short. Jihoon tried to turn his head to track the person that was now walking past him, but he found himself unable to control his body. His body bowed again towards a person that wasn't even there. Why was it doing that? He desperately urged his body to turn around only for it to bow once again and greet empty space.

To his dismay, when his body finally moved again it turned in the opposite direction and began walking away. *'No!'* Jihoon tried once again to turn around and seek out the silhouette of a person to no avail. His head faced stubbornly forward no matter how many times he urged it to move. The sound of the crowd began to get closer and his body finally stopped moving. As he took the final bow, he was sure he could feel a pair of eyes burning into the back of his head.

Jihoon woke up with a gasp. A sharp agitation coursed through his body and he found himself looking around his room in search of something. He wasn't quite sure what he was looking for but the fact that he couldn't find it made him all the more annoyed. He twisted his

head around only to be faced with a blank wall. Why did he think there was something there? He was sitting in bed, of course there wasn't anyone behind him. That was ridiculous.

He laid back down and closed his eyes. The agitation still itched like ants crawling over his skin, urging him to get up and *look for it* . Jihoon groaned and rolled onto his back, glaring miserably at the ceiling.

"What am I looking for?" He said irritably. Unsurprisingly, the empty space didn't reply to him, but the voice in his head urged him once again to *look* . He pulled the blankets over his head and hoped the added darkness would help him fall asleep again. Of course it didn't. The voice in his head didn't shut up until Jihoon reluctantly threw off his blankets and got out of bed.

The clock read 3am as Jihoon wandered out into the common area to get a glass of water. To his surprise, there was still someone sitting on the couch. The glow of their laptop was the only thing visible in the otherwise dark apartment and Jihoon squinted to see who it was.

He gasped as a sharp pain laced through his skull. It was familiar. It felt familiar. Someone. Someone he couldn't see. Someone that was important. When did this happen? Why couldn't he remember?

"Hyung?" Suhwan's voice broke through the silence and the light disappeared abruptly as he slammed his laptop closed. "What are you doing awake? I thought you were sleeping? What- when did you get here?"

Jihoon blinked blearily into the darkness as his eyes adjusted, "I couldn't sleep. What are you doing awake?"

"Uhh, I couldn't sleep either." Suhwan mumbled.

Jihoon frowned. Why did he sound so nervous? Why would he close his laptop like he was looking at something he shouldn't be? Jihoon grimaced as he realized what it could be. Suhwan was at that age after all. Jihoon sighed, "It's fine if..you know." he cleared his throat

awkwardly, “Just don’t do it in common areas okay? I know you still have to share a room with Siwoo hyung and all but maybe the bathroom…?”

Suhwan’s dumbfounded expression was barely visible in the dimly lit living room, “Hyung, what are you talking about?”

“You know,” Jihoon gestured vaguely at the computer, “Whatever you were looking at on your laptop. Nothing to be embarrassed about, just-”

“I wasn’t-” Suhwan looked absolutely mortified, “Did you think I was- Hyung!!!”

Suhwan sounded so appalled that it was almost funny if it weren’t so awkward. “Why else would you have closed your screen so fast?” Jihoon defended himself, “Stop acting like I drew a weird conclusion.”

“I was looking at-” Suhwan paused and hesitated before he opened his laptop again. Jihoon walked closer to peer at his screen.

“Soulmates without tattoos?” Jihoon read.

Suhwan fidgeted, looking embarrassed, “It’s just an online forum. People talk about soulmates and stuff. I like looking at it sometimes because it makes me feel better.”

It didn’t take a genius to figure out what was going on. The name of the forum was pretty self explanatory, and so was why someone would browse the contents to cheer themselves up. Jihoon steeled himself and mustered up the best older brother energy he could. Emotional support? He could do that. Easy. He would say something simultaneously comforting and understanding. He could ease the embarrassment and bad mood all at once.

“That sounds, uh, nice. I’m glad it helps.” Jihoon cringed at himself even as he said the words aloud. He could do better than that. “It sounds really interesting,” Jihoon continued, “What kind of things do people post?”

That seemed to be the right direction to take, because Suhwan relaxed a bit and began to scroll through the website, “It’s just stories mostly, but lots of helpful tips too.”

“Tips?” Jihoon echoed.

“Tips that people without distinctive tattoos can use to find their soulmate.” Suhwan said, “It’s less reliable of course, but there are lots of things I never knew before finding this group.”

Jihoon felt a familiar pang in his chest at the mention of soul marks, this time accompanied with something else. He swallowed nervously, struggling to keep his voice neutral when he spoke again, “There are other ways?”

Suhwan turned to look at Jihoon with a new light in his eyes, “It’s still a topic that’s being studied, but there’s some pretty concrete evidence already! The most well studied ones are prophetic dreams, which are a type of dream that you have after you meet your soulmate. Unlike your special words, the dreams aren’t a one time thing. They happen every time you meet your soulmate so even though the words aren’t special enough there’s still a way for people to tell if they’ve met their soulmate. Of course it means it could be anyone they met that day but it’s still better having some clue as opposed to not knowing at all. And there’s also a new theory emerging about the universe naturally pushing soulmates towards each other, but that one is harder to study because it’s so abstract. There’s this one lady’s story that makes it seem really plausible though. What happened to her was so absurd that it had to be some sort of universal interven-”

Suhwan trailed off and looked embarrassed again when he realized he was rambling, “Sorry. I’ve just looked into this a lot because…” he stared down at his wrist and Jihoon followed his gaze. In the soft glow of the laptop screen, he could vaguely see the words “good morning” written in plain and unassuming black script. Jihoon looked away like he had seen something he wasn’t supposed to. He must’ve covered it with makeup every morning. Jihoon couldn’t imagine having to look at his tattoo every day like that.

“Yeah.” Suhwan mumbled, “That’s why I look at this stuff. It just gives me more hope. You know that most people with generic soul marks never find their soulmate?”

“Yeah.” Jihoon’s voice felt heavy, “82% according to the census this year. Higher than 77% in the previous year.”

Suhwan looked up at him with wide eyes, “You also….?”

Jihoon nodded, ignoring the pain in his chest. Suhwan stared at him for a few more seconds. Jihoon knew what he was expecting, but he couldn’t bring himself to lift the sleeve of his shirt. Jihoon looked away and Suhwan quickly turned his head back to face the laptop. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Jihoon forced himself to say, “I just don’t like thinking about it.”

“Well maybe you can look through the forum?” Suhwan suggested tentatively, “It always comforts me. Or if you don’t want to think about it at all, that's fine too.”

Jihoon smiled, “Thanks Suhwan. You really should get some sleep though. Who knows, maybe you’ll have your dream tonight.”

Suhwan wrinkled his nose, “I hope not. I’ve met so many people today that it would be impossible to tell who it was.”

Jihoon laughed, relieved that Suhwan looked to be in good spirits again, “That’s true. I should probably try to sleep more too.”

“Hyung?” Suhwan called as Jihoon turned to leave. Jihoon stopped and glanced back towards him. Suhwan looked awkward again, “I don’t know the right way to phrase this and I don’t mean to offend at all. It just…It made me feel better that you’re also like me. Because if someone like you has the same problem as me, then maybe it doesn’t mean that I’m not-”

Suhwan frowned as he tried to find the right words, “Then maybe it’s not a bad thing. If you’re the same. Like, If someone as amazing as you was also given a generic soulmark,

maybe it doesn't mean that I'm doomed to be mediocre. Something like that. If that makes sense. Sorry. I'll just go to sleep."

"Thanks for saying that." Jihoon called after him, "Goodnight."

Suhwan gave him a small nod before disappearing into his room. Jihoon stared into the emptiness of the dark room. He wasn't sure if learning that his teammate was like him too made it better or worse. He didn't want anyone else to deal with the doubts he did, yet something about what Suhwan said made sense. It would be absurd to say Suhwan wasn't special just because of his mark, so it would take some mental gymnastics to still think himself inadequate for the same reason. Yet…..

Jihoon sighed. Wouldn't it have been nice to be born special though?

Like some sort of masochist, he often clicked on articles gossiping about different LCK players and their soulmarks. The poster child for them, of course, was Geonbu and Heosu.

The photo was burned into everybody's mind at this point. They stood on stage, the world's trophy they just won next to them. Brilliant smiles were plastered across their faces and confetti fluttered through the air. The star of the show was the soulmarks displayed proudly on their forearms; They both glittered in an identical silvery blue color, the sentences side by side as their hands were clasped together and raised above their heads in a celebration of their victory.

"Let's make history together."

"When you smile like that it makes me feel like anything is possible."

A familiar envy twisted his stomach as Jihoon scrolled past the photo in the latest article about soulmate tattoos. They always had to use that photo didn't they. Jihoon pushed it out of his mind and continued to scroll down. To his surprise, the next one was a photo of Minseok. It looked to be a frame from one of their videos, and the collar of his shirt was pulled down enough to reveal red and golden script scrawled under his collarbone.

“How is it possible you’re cuter in person.”

Even through the envy, Jihoon found himself feeling happy for Minseok. What a soulmark to have. How would it feel, to have a soulmark like that? He could guess with fair certainty who Minseok’s soulmate was too. He really was lucky, in more ways than one. Pain stabbed at his chest as he read the words under the photo: “A tattoo truly befitting of a genius. As if we needed more proof that Ryu “Keria” Minseok was truly special.”

Jihoon scrolled past the remainder of the commentary and to the next photo. This time it was Wooje, a cheeky smile on his face as he leaned over to steal something out of Minhyung’s plate. The next photo zoomed in on Wooje’s ankle, where the bottom of his pants had rode up enough to expose the words “Wanna duo?” written in red and black. Before Jihoon’s eye could catch on the paragraph no doubt talking about how the tattoo was proof Wooje was born to play league, he scrolled onto the next photo.

He was surprised again when he was faced with a photo of Sanghyeok. It was an old photo, it couldn’t have been taken long after he first debuted. Surely if someone like Sanghyeok’s tattoo was known Jihoon would’ve heard about it already. There was no way that sort of news wouldn’t spread like wildfire. The next photo was zoomed in on a spot just above his hip. Sanghyeok’s arms were raised, causing the hem of his shirt to lift ever so slightly. Although no words were visible, a hint of red text could be seen. No wonder no one had discovered it before now.

Even with not a single word visible, this photo somehow made Jihoon feel the worst. The paragraph below speculating on the red color of the tattoo matching the team he was loyal to didn’t help. Of course he was special too. Jihoon wouldn’t be surprised if his soulmate was one of his old teammates. If he was right about who he guessed to be Minseok and Wooje’s soulmates, it would mean every member of that team had tattoos printed in red. Of course they did. Of course they were just that special.

Jihoon closed the tab with the article, feeling guilty about the bitter thoughts spiraling through his head. It wasn’t their fault they were born lucky and it wasn’t their fault Jihoon wasn’t. For the first time in a long time, Jihoon pulled up the sleeve of his shirt to look at his tattoo.

Hello, it's nice to meet you.

The words still made his heart ache in a way that nothing else could. He traced his fingers over it. The words were in neat but unremarkable script, the only consolation being that they were written with all the colors of the rainbow. One color blended seamlessly into the next as they spelled out the cursed words. Before Jihoon learned to read, the tattoo had looked beautiful to him. Compared to the dull monocolor tattoos that were common, the rainbow lettering was special. Until he learned to read the words he thought it meant he was special too.

He pulled the sleeve of his shirt down with a sigh. There was no point dwelling on it. If people wouldn't give him pitying looks, would he even care about the unremarkable tattoo? If it weren't for the judgment he wouldn't even care what his soul mark looked like. He was too busy for love, it had always been more about what the uniqueness of the mark meant symbolically. He didn't care that it made it difficult to find his soulmate. He would be fine choosing someone himself instead of letting fate decide for him.

Or would he?

Even if no one would look at him with pity or look down on him, would he truly be happy with someone that wasn't his soulmate? Every time he thought about it, it had been about the way people viewed such relationships as lesser or unnatural, he had never considered his own opinion on it. Would he be happy with it? Would he be satisfied settling for someone else?

Well, the fact that he considered it settling at all was enough of an answer.

"82%." He said aloud to himself. "82% chance I end up alone."

Maybe it was worth looking into that thing Suhwan was talking about after all. Curiosity took the place of the bitterness as he clicked onto the website Suhwan showed him earlier. A quick glance through the forum told him that it was mostly just people sharing the dreams they had with others. Some posts talked about the struggles and others celebrated finally finding their person after a long search.

Pinned at the very top was what Jihoon assumed Suhwan was talking about earlier: The story of the woman that met her soulmate through universal intervention.

Jihoon was sure reading someone else's success story would only make him feel worse, but he clicked on it anyway. Curiosity killed the cat, but hopefully this was an instance where satisfaction would bring it back to life.

"Parallel line theory: If two soulmates exist around each other for long enough without forming a bond, the universe will intervene to force them together. Parallel lines do not meet no matter how long they run side by side. The fates recognize this and twist reality to make them collide anyway.

The theory sounds crazy, but hear me out! It took me three years of working at the same company with my soulmate(now my husband) to realize he was my soulmate, and the series of events leading up to that realization sound like the plot to some romantic comedy!

I started out at a different company. I work in finance and originally was an analyst at a small company. My soulmate was a lawyer, and worked on the legal side of the financial industry. The first time we met he was doing an inspection of our company and shortly after that the company was shut down. I didn't think much of it and ended up at another company. Somehow, that company also shut down within a month. Finally, I ended up at the same company as my soulmate. I still worked in the finance department while he worked in the legal department.

For context, the restructuring team hadn't run into legal troubles in over a year. When I joined then however, legal issues began to arise within the month. First they began happening every month or so, then every week, then before I knew it I spent every hour of every day working side by side with my soulmate. Of course, with us so focused on work it never even occurred to me to think about my soulmate. I didn't know about the prophetic dreams at this point in time, so it just felt like I was dreaming about work all the time haha.

We worked with each other for almost a year before the most absurd series of events happened. It was summer during an unexpected heatwave, and the generators overheated while I was in the elevator with him. The power went out and trapped us there. Typically firefighters would be called to help resolve the situation but there was conveniently a large house fire all the way on the other side of the city. No one was coming to help us.

With the air conditioning shut off alongside the power, it was starting to get really hot in the elevator and we agreed that we would both look the other way and just take off our clothes. I don't know how long we sat there in our underwear, but at some point when I moved I saw that his soulmark was the same color as mine. I freaked out a little and probably handled it poorly but I grabbed his arm to get a closer look. He was also freaked out by that at first, but when I touched the mark it started glowing the way people always said it would.

Looking at the dull tattoo I had, I never thought that it could actually be beautiful, but the moment he touched it the words were the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. The way people describe the glow in books doesn't do it justice. Looking at the tattoo that day, I could finally understand how moths could find something so captivating that they don't even notice themselves burning alive."

The post ended there.

To Jihoon's surprise he did feel better. Like Suhwan said, the story brought him an odd sort of comfort. Even if the tattoos weren't enough for him to locate his soulmate, maybe the universe would bring them together regardless. He pulled up his sleeve to look at his tattoo again. This time he imagined someone else's fingers running over it, and wherever the imaginary fingers touched the words would light up in a brilliant glow.

He sighed and covered the tattoo again. It was a nice thought while it lasted. Nothing but wishful thinking. The next post pinned on the front page caught his eye: The definitive guide to prophetic dreams. The hope he was trying to suppress leapt up again and urged him to click on the post.

"Hello everyone! As someone who has tracked prophetic dreams for over a year before successfully finding my soulmate through them, here is my definitive guide to identifying and interpreting soulmate dreams!

1. The only thing visible in your dream will be your soulmate. If you can see any other people or objects then it is NOT a prophetic dream. It's likely you'll be aware that other things exist but you shouldn't be able to actually see them.

2. You may or may not see your soulmate's physical attributes but any characteristic you notice will be accurate! Your soulmate will usually appear as a silhouette or you won't be

able to remember how they look when you wake up, but any hints you remember will be helpful in finding them in real life! In fact, I finally located my soulmate because I saw his earring in a dream and remembered how it looked.

3. The contents of your dream will give you hints on where you met or aspects of their personality. However, the dreams are NOT literal(e.g if your dream is in a coffee shop it doesn't mean you met in a coffee shop). An example would be dreaming about a bookstore and the both of you liking to read or being cold in a dream because you ran into your soulmate somewhere outside.

4. The more you run into them the more likely you are to have dreams vivid enough that you remember them. Once you've spoken to them the dreams should become more and more informative as well. However, I was friends with my soulmate for almost half a year before I got a single hint about his appearance in a dream. If you don't befriend them then it may take even longer for the dreams to become more specific. Awareness is key! Most people don't pay much attention to their dreams and don't even notice these special ones happen.

5. Last but not least, be careful of placebo dreams! Once you become aware of these dreams and how they should look, your brain may artificially produce them. Take the events of each dream with a grain of salt and keep an open mind!

Happy soulmate finding!"

Jihoon laid back onto his bed and stared at the ceiling. It seemed simple enough in concept. It took that person a year. A year wasn't really that long in the grand scheme of things. If he started trying starting now, how long would it take him? There was no guarantee he was even going to meet his soulmate anytime soon though. Some people didn't meet theirs until much later in life.

He turned onto his side and closed his eyes. It didn't matter when he met them. He could wait. At the very least, with the new information in mind, he wouldn't miss the moment he met them. It was a comforting thought. Once he met them, he would find them just like that person had. Except he wouldn't take a year. He could do it in half that time. A quarter of the time. Just like in his career, he had no room for doubts. Even if the words on his arm were useless, at least he could take things into his own hands. In the end, he trusted himself a lot more than he trusted fate.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Okay! Since today is set aside for filming footage for the teasers after you guys are done you're free to explore wherever you want in Chengdu. Don't stay out too late though, we're back to practicing at 10am tomorrow morning."

"Okay." They said in unison, waiting until their manager left the room to turn to each other with excited smiles.

"Gi-in, get hotpot with me after?" Siwoo suggested.

"Sure." Gi-in agreed.

"Can I come too?" Suhwan asked.

Before Siwoo could respond Geonbu cut in, "You don't want to third wheel those two all night. We can go somewhere else. Jihoon can come with us too if he's up for it."

Jihoon just shrugged, it wasn't like he had any other travel plans. Honestly, after a day of filming he'd probably prefer to just go back to the hotel and rest. "I'll go with you two if I'm not too tired." Jihoon said honestly, "I'll probably just go back and sleep though."

"Lame." Siwoo snickered.

"I couldn't sleep on the plane," Jihoon defended himself, "You were snoring the whole time."

"I don't snore!" Siwoo protested.

“Yes you do.” Geonbu and Jihoon said at the same time.

Before Siwoo could argue back, the makeup artists entered the room and began to set up all their supplies. Jihoon obediently sat down on the chair they pushed towards him despite the fact that he was dreading having to put on makeup once again. It was always a pain to wear and even more of a pain to take off.

“Hello, it’s nice to meet you! I’ll be styling you today, any preferences?”

Jihoon tried not to grimace as the lady with the cheerful smile said his words. He eyed her warily, what if it *was* her? If he said something generic in return, she wouldn’t know and they would pass by each other like nothing happened. Maybe he should say something odd just to test it out.

“Do you have anything that smells like strawberry?” He asked.

“Huh? Well…” The lady frowned and began to study the spread of products on the table.

It wasn’t her then.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jihoon said with a smile, “I was just wondering. Any style is okay for me. You know best.”

He closed his eyes and forced himself to stay still as she began to apply products to his face. What he said was definitely distinct enough that she would have realized immediately if it was her. Despite the fact that the chance that his soulmate was this random person was basically nonexistent, he still found himself disappointed anyway. Maybe he could just give a bizarre response every time someone greeted him with his words, just in case it was them.

He entertained the thought for a little while longer before casting it aside. He was probably going to meet dozens of new people today. A vast majority would probably greet him with the words he had grown to hate, he couldn't just respond with something bizarre to all of them. Maybe he should make a mental note of the people that did greet him, just in case he had the prophetic dream tonight.

No. That wouldn't work either. There was no guarantee he hadn't already met his soulmate. If he focused only on the people that said his words he might overlook the actual person. If he did already meet his soulmate, that would complicate things quite a lot. If only he had known about the dreams earlier, maybe his chances would be better.

"All done! Take a look and see if you're okay with it."

Jihoon opened his eyes and looked at himself in the mirror. Aside from the added color to his lips he was sure he looked the exact same as he looked before. Why go through the trouble of using makeup when it didn't even do anything? Outwardly at least, he gave her a smile, "It looks good. Thank you."

"I'm glad, be on set in ten minutes okay?"

Jihoon nodded in acknowledgment and closed his eyes again. He took a deep breath to clear his head. Now wasn't the time to ruminate about unnecessary things. He had spent more than a few late nights scrolling through the forum Suhwan introduced him to since that night, not that he would ever admit it aloud. It was just interesting reading about other people's dreams and experiences. He was doing it to learn, not as some way of consoling himself. It didn't matter if it just happened to make him feel better in the process.

His resolve to put the topic aside proved to be harder than he thought as he was greeted by his words everywhere he turned. First it was the camera crew. Then the staff. Then the interns. Then the directors. Then the stage crew. Then the scriptwriters. Then the staff in the recording studio. Jihoon suddenly remembered why he hated going to new places as the 20th person greeted him with a cheerful "Hello, it's nice to meet you."

It was barely half way through the day and Jihoon was positive he'd be too drained to do any sightseeing after they finished filming. He glanced over at Suhwan, who was probably struggling with the same problem. If it wasn't "Hello, it's nice to meet you" then it was "good

morning". At least they were firmly into the afternoon hours now, so Suhwan shouldn't have to deal with that anymore.

"Jihoon hyung!"

Jihoon turned towards the sound of a familiar voice to see Minseok waving at him. He smiled. It was impossible not to smile when looking at Minseok. "Minseok," he greeted, "Are you guys done already?"

"Not yet, I still have to do a few voice recordings. We finished all the destination shots though. It was a lot of walking. The producers do realize most of us leave the house maybe once a week right?" Minseok complained, "I don't think I've walked that much in a long time."

"It wasn't that bad. The city was nice." Jihoon said despite the fact that his feet hurt a little from all the walking too.

"Any plans for sightseeing after?" Minseok asked with an excited look in his eyes, "Or do you guys have a schedule after filming?"

"No, I have the evening off once I'm done here." Jihoon said.

"We should get dinner then," Minseok suggested, "It's been a while since we got to hang out."

"Sure," Jihoon agreed. Even if he was tired, Minseok was right that this was probably the only opportunity they'd get to spend time together in a long time. "Did you want to get something to eat after filming? Then I'll probably head back to the hotel. It's been a long day and it's not even over yet."

"Sounds good!" Minseok said with a bright smile, "That works since Minhyungie will probably want to go somewhere later tonight anyway. I'll come get you after I'm done!"

Minseok shouted over his shoulder as he ran off to join his teammates again. Jihoon couldn't help but feel a pang of envy when Minseok mentioned his soulmate. They got to travel around the world competing together, pursuing their dreams side by side.

Even as he filmed the rest of his scenes, he found his eyes wandering to Minseok and the others. Minhyung always clung to Minseok's side when he could. Even when he couldn't, his eyes were always glued to Minseok as if he would disappear if he looked away for even a moment. There was so much adoration in his eyes. Despite the fact that the ache in Jihoon's chest grew ever the more painful, he just couldn't look away. He wondered if he would ever look at someone with that much warmth and affection. He wondered if anyone would ever give him that look in return.

Wooje and Hyeonjun were a little bit different. They didn't stick by each other's side or stare constantly, yet there was still a sense that they gravitated towards each other. Every so often Hyeonjun would glance at Wooje. Then Wooje would glance at Hyeonjun. Hyeonjun would throw a bottle of water at Wooje and walk away without a word. Wooje would pinch Hyeonjun on the arm on his way to talk to Minseok and Hyeonjun would roll his eyes and go back to what he was doing.

Jihoon wondered which dynamic he would want for himself. Would he prefer intense and adoring? Or comfortable and lighthearted? Both were founded on an unspoken, unshakable trust despite appearing different on the surface. Jihoon's gaze drifted towards the final member of the team. He wondered what Sanghyeok's dynamic with his person was like. They must be someone special too. It only made sense that someone like Sanghyeok had a soulmate that was just as special as he was, although Jihoon wasn't sure that was even possible. What kind of person would fate even choose for a person as special as Sanghyeok?

Even the light seemed to be drawn towards Sanghyeok as the rest of his team crowded around him with happy smiles on their faces. Light glowed like a halo around Sanghyeok's head as he passed around a bag of snacks to four eager pairs of hands. The five of them together seemed to glow even brighter. It was as if the five of them had a gravity pulling them together. The two fated pairs were tied together by destiny and orbited around Sanghyeok like he was the center of their galaxy. It was a complete picture, so how did Sanghyeok's soulmate fit into that dynamic?

"Your acting has gotten better."

“Huh?” Jihoon snapped out of his thoughts and looked at Siwoo blankly.

“Your acting,” Siwoo gestured at the camera, “The far-away brooding stare you did looked so natural. Usually this kind of thing is at least a little bit awkward.”

“Oh.” It seemed like Jihoon spaced out for longer than he thought he did. “Was that our last scene?”

“Yup! Finally done.” Siwoo cheered, he turned to Gi-in, “Ready to go?”

Gi-in raised an eyebrow, “Now? You don’t want to go back to the hotel and change?”

“No, it’s fine. Unless you do?”

Their conversation faded into the background as the two of them walked off, leaving Geonbu and Suhwan with Jihoon. Suhwan looked slightly glum at his support immediately ditching him and Jihoon felt guilty about the fact that he was about to leave to have dinner with Minseok. He glanced over at Geonbu and Suhwan, who were both looking at Geonbu’s phone to search for restaurants nearby. How should he tell them he wasn’t coming along?

“Jihoon hyung!” Minseok appeared out of the crowd of staff members cleaning up their equipment. He skipped over and tugged on Jihoon’s sleeve, “Ready to go?”

“Uhhh,” Jihoon glanced at his teammates awkwardly.

Minseok followed his gaze and immediately greeted them politely, “I invited Jihoon hyung to get dinner with me earlier. Did you guys want to come along too?”

“No, no, that’s okay.” Suhwan said quickly, “Thank you for the offer Minseok-ssi.”

“I’ll keep Suhwan company,” Geonbu said, “You two have fun. Come on, let’s go. I found a good restaurant nearby. It says they have a low wait time too.”

Minseok watched them walk away with a moderately perplexed expression, “Did I scare them?”

“I think after an entire day of filming the last thing I’d want to do is make small talk with an unfamiliar person over dinner,” Jihoon said dryly, “Thanks for offering though, now I don’t have to feel bad for ditching them.”

They took a taxi to the restaurant Minseok recommended. It seemed like a popular place, but it was dimly lit enough that they probably wouldn’t get recognized immediately. Thankfully the booth Minseok reserved was also off in the corner. As much as he loved meeting his fans, a peaceful dinner sounded nice after the long day.

The conversation flowed naturally and they talked about anything and everything. Every other sentence that came out of Minseok’s mouth seemed to be about his teammates. Or his soulmate. Minseok’s mouth curled into a soft smile every time he said Minhyung’s name. Jihoon looked down at his bowl and pretended to be occupied with peeling a piece of shrimp. He should be happy about his friend’s happiness. He should be, yet he couldn’t help but feel envious anyway.

“Here.” A piece of perfectly peeled shrimp landed in his bowl and Minseok continued eating like nothing happened. Jihoon stared at the piece of shrimp. The small gesture of kindness suddenly made him feel even more guilty about his own bitter thoughts. “Hyung? What’s wrong?” Minseok asked when Jihoon just stared at his bowl without eating.

“I’ve been having a rough day.” Jihoon admitted.

“If you’re tired we can head back,” Minseok offered.

“No it’s not that, it’s-”

Pain stabbed at his chest when he glanced down. Minseok leaned forward in his concern, causing his shirt to shift down just enough to expose the soulmark under his collarbone. It looked even more brilliant in person. Even in the dimly lit room the words seemed to glow. The sentence was written in a bold script fitting of the person that said the words. Minseok followed his gaze and pulled his collar back up to cover the tattoo.

"It's a bit of a funny one isn't it?" Minseok said with a sheepish laugh, "It's probably obvious who my soulmate is. Somehow I didn't make the connection until the day we met, even though I should've guessed just by the content of the words." The same soft smile found its way onto his face again, "I just wasn't sure if hearing his voice over a discord call counted or not."

"It's a nice tattoo. I'm happy for you." Jihoon said. Despite the envy still stirring in his chest he found that he wholeheartedly meant the words, "It sounds nice, having a tattoo like that."

Minseok stared at him with an expression that reminded Jihoon that Minseok was a lot more perceptive than people thought. He reached over and dropped another peeled shrimp in Jihoon's bowl, "Do you know what Minhyung's tattoo said?"

That wasn't what Jihoon expected.

"I don't."

"Hi."

Jihoon frowned, "What?"

"His tattoo. All it said was 'hi'." Minseok said. The look Minseok was giving him seemed to stare straight into his soul. Or maybe Jihoon was being too predictable. Jihoon scooped one of the shrimp Minseok peeled for him into his mouth. Strangely enough, he *did* feel better. Just because his tattoo was something generic didn't mean that his soulmate's was. Just because his own tattoo wasn't unique didn't mean he wasn't destined to be special.

“Thanks.” Jihoon said, feeling the weight lift from his chest slightly.

Minseok smiled at him, “I’m good at peeling shrimp.”

Jihoon couldn’t help but smile back. The look in Minseok’s eyes made it obvious he knew Jihoon wasn’t referring to the shrimp, but Jihoon was grateful Minseok didn’t push the topic.

“Minseokie?”

Minseok glanced up at the sound of his name and immediately broke into a wide smile, “Minhyungie! What are you doing here?”

They greeted each other like they were reuniting after years of separation despite the fact that it couldn’t have been more than an hour since they last saw each other. Even after pulling away from the hug Minhyung kept his hand on Minseok’s shoulder. He smiled a smile that looked barely sincere enough to be believable, “I was just out getting dinner with Wooje and Hyeonjun. I didn’t realize you’d also be at the restaurant we chose. We were just on our way out when we noticed you here.”

“It was a coincidence.” Wooje said with a nod.

At least with Wooje’s contribution Jihoon was now sure it was most definitely not a coincidence. Looking at the adoration in Minhyung’s eyes now, Jihoon felt amused instead of bitter. Jihoon recalled Minhyung’s jealous streak against Minseok’s old adc and barely held back from letting the amusement show on his face. How was it possible to feel jealousy when fate itself chose your person for you? A spark of envy finally lit in his chest he found himself wishing he could feel so strongly about someone that he could feel that irrational jealousy. How would that emotion feel?

“Sanghyeok hyung didn’t come with you guys?” Minseok asked.

“He was feeling under the weather.” Minhyung said with a slight frown. Jihoon’s attention focused back in onto the conversation at the mention of Sanghyeok. Under the weather? Was he sick?

“I ordered him something to go.” Hyeonjun said, holding up a bag, “I can run back and give it to him and then meet you guys at the bar.”

“I can bring it to him.” Jihoon blurted.

Four pairs of eyes suddenly turned to him.

“I was heading back anyway.” Jihoon said, wondering why he felt like he was defending himself, “We’re at the same hotel right? I can just bring it to him. You guys can go out and enjoy your time off.”

“You didn’t want to come with us?” Minseok asked, “The place is supposed to have nice drinks and be fairly quiet. It’s not really the rowdy type of bar.”

“Hyeonjunie’s fast too.” Minhyung added,” It’s no bother.”

“I think I’m too tired to stay out much longer.” Jihoon said.

Hyeonjun shrugged and handed Jihoon the takeout bag, “Hyung’s in room 703.”

“Got it.”

“Bye! Thanks for helping out!” Minseok called as they split off to enjoy the rest of their night. Jihoon waved back with a smile. He watched them for a moment longer as they walked away. Minhyung’s arm found Minseok’s waist and Wooje and Hyeonjun brushed shoulders as they walked.

Jihoon turned and headed back to the hotel alone. This time the emotion prickling at his skin was a dull sadness. It was the same sadness that greeted him every time someone said his words. He used to imagine himself together with his own soulmate whenever he felt down about it. It wasn't long before those fantasies only made reality hurt even more.

Maybe he could let himself imagine again, just for a little bit. For the few moments he daydreamed he would be happy at least. It wasn't like he thought about his soulmate too much when he was busy with other things anyway. The disappointment would barely last a day before he would be consumed with thoughts of MSI. It was harmless to let himself dream a little.

What did he want his soulmate to be like? He hadn't thought about it in so long that he hardly knew anymore. When he was younger it was easy to just imagine someone pretty and kind, an innocent and shallow fantasy. Life was a lot more complicated now with his life and career. He needed someone that would be understanding of it all. Most people wouldn't be thrilled to hear that their partner played video games for a living after all.

After watching them all day, Jihoon realized he had idealized Minseok and Minhyung's relationship in his head. When he thought of what he wanted, they were the people that popped into his head. He wanted to be a soulmate like Minhyung, strong and reliable. He wanted to meet someone that allowed him to be as unabashedly enamored the way Minhyung was. He wanted to feel what Minhyung was feeling when he looked at Minseok like that.

Did that mean he wanted someone like Minseok then? He pondered it for a moment before casting the thought aside. The person he imagined in his head wasn't quite the same. They would still be playful and wordlessly supportive, but they would also be calmer and more mature. Someone pretty and elegant. Jihoon idly cycled through different variations of appearance as he made his way back to the hotel. He imagined his soulmate with long hair. Short hair. As a woman. As a man. Tall. Short.

Nothing seemed quite right, so Jihoon settled on a faceless figure with an elegant frame. He imagined lifting the MSI trophy and turning around to see his soulmate smiling at him. They would run to each other and Jihoon would sweep them up in a hug. Despite the fact that they would still be on stage, they would be so caught up in their own world that they wouldn't even hear the crowd around them. His soulmate's expression would glow with pride and adoration. Jihoon would look back at them like they were the most beautiful person in the

world. He would stare until his soulmate had to physically shove him away as a reminder that his team was waiting for him. He would rejoin his team and lift the trophy once again.

As always, his sleeve would slip down to show the tattoo blazed across his arm. This time, when he laid eyes on the tattoo fate gifted him, he would smile.

Chapter End Notes

Posting before the big series as I usually do c:

I hope this provides a small distraction at least and let's all continue stacking good karma for T1! 🍀

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Room 703.

Jihoon recited the number in his head as he took the elevator to the 7th floor. He touched the takeout box and was relieved to find that it was still warm. The smell of the food filled the elevator and Jihoon realized it was the same dish Minseok ordered earlier. He hoped Sanghyeok wouldn't have too much trouble peeling the shrimp. If it was troublesome to eat, wouldn't he eat less? That wasn't good if he was feeling sick. Maybe Minseok should've ordered something else.

He knocked on the door.

For a few seconds nothing happened. Jihoon wondered if maybe Sanghyeok was asleep already. Should he knock louder? Or just check back later to deliver the food? His pondering was cut short when the door opened to reveal a surprised looking Sanghyeok. He was dressed casually, and Jihoon was suddenly struck by the fact that he rarely got to see him outside of his uniform. Or even out of his jacket at all.

"Jihoon? What are you doing here?"

Jihoon pried his eyes away from Sanghyeok's arms to make polite eye contact, "Minseok asked me to bring you some food since I was heading back early anyway."

Sanghyeok smiled and took the bag from Jihoon. "I told him I would get my own dinner," he said, voice filled with a fond exasperation, "Sorry to trouble you with this."

"It's no trouble at all." Jihoon assured. He eyed Sanghyeok, he didn't look sick. He was pale, but he was always pale. His lips were a healthy pink color, but maybe that was leftover lipstick from filming today.

“How did you like seeing the city today?” Sanghyeok asked. Despite the fact that it was a classic small talk topic, Sanghyeok seemed genuinely interested.

“It wasn’t bad. I think after the first few locations I started getting too tired to properly appreciate it.” Jihoon responded. His eyes once again drifted to Sanghyeok’s lips. It didn’t look like makeup. Then again, the color always left a subtle tint if makeup remover wasn’t used. Maybe he was just tired from filming after all. Not sick.

“That’s true, the pace in which we went to different locations wasn’t really suited for sightseeing.” Sanghyeok agreed, “Are you headed back to your room now? Or did you want to stay a while? I would feel bad sending you away after you came all this way to deliver the food.”

“Stay?” Jihoon repeated.

“If you wanted to come in,” Sanghyeok said, gesturing at his room, “No pressure of course. I just wanted to let you know that the option is there. I know that you must be tired though.”

“No, not at all,” Jihoon found himself saying despite the fact that he was indeed tired, “I could stay for a bit longer.”

Sanghyeok gestured for him to follow and headed back into his room. Jihoon glanced around the room as he walked in. It was the same type of room as his. It was spacious with a single bed. It looked like he didn’t have roommates either. That made sense considering his teammates were all paired off with each other. The view from the window was nicer than from Jihoon’s room. They were high up enough to see the tops of other buildings.

“Did you want to sit down?” Sanghyeok offered. He was already sitting at a small table with the takeout boxes spread out in front of him. Jihoon sat across from him and watched as Sanghyeok organized a mix of onions and bell peppers onto the spoon alongside a scoop of rice. Once he was satisfied with the balance of flavors he shoveled the entire bite into his mouth. Jihoon couldn’t help but smile as he watched Sanghyeok eat. With how sharp the structure of his face was, the ballooning of his cheeks as he ate was ever the more prominent. It was cute.

“Did you want anything to drink?” Sanghyeok asked in between bites, “I have water and soda in the fridge. I also have energy drinks but I’m not sure you’d want to drink those at the moment.”

“Don’t the drinks at hotels cost extra?” Jihoon said.

Sanghyeok shook his head, “I bought them at the store nearby so don’t worry about that. I thought I should stock up just in case the others wanted something to drink.”

“Oh.” Jihoon was somehow both surprised and not surprised at the same time, “That’s really thoughtful.”

“I’ve just known them for a long time.” Sanghyeok said. He dabbed at his mouth with a napkin and Jihoon noted that there was a faint pink smear that appeared on the paper. So it was makeup after all. Maybe the rest of his healthy looking complexion was also just makeup then. Jihoon felt his fingers twitch as he watched Sanghyeok carefully peel a piece of shrimp. He didn’t peel them as fast as Minseok did.

“Are you still hungry?” Sanghyeok’s voice brought Jihoon out of his pondering.

Jihoon realized in embarrassment that he was probably staring at Sanghyeok’s food for far too long. “No I ate a lot while I was out,” he said, “I was just wondering how they cooked it like that.”

The lie came easily and was believable enough. Sanghyeok didn’t seem to notice and launched into a conversation about different chinese recipes. He knew a lot about cooking for a proplayer. Although, if Jihoon were to choose any player to somehow be good at cooking, he probably would have chosen Sanghyeok. He just seemed like the type to have this sort of life skill even though every meal was provided to him.

Jihoon was happy to listen to Sanghyeok talk about various cooking techniques. Some of it flew right over his head, but some of it was actually rather useful. He didn’t realize so many

recipes contained sugar even though they didn't taste all that sweet. Sanghyeok tried to switch the conversation to Jihoon and Jihoon prompted Sanghyeok to continue talking with a well placed question about instant ramen brands. After a long day of interacting with people, he was more than happy to just sit and listen to Sanghyeok talk. It felt comfortable. He always had openings to chime in with an opinion or question, but there was no pressure to speak or carry the conversation.

"Did you want me to walk you back to your room?" Sanghyeok offered as he put down his chopsticks.

Jihoon eyed the takeout box. He still had several pieces of shrimp left. The observation bothered Jihoon more than it should have. He looked away from the offending pieces of shellfish, "It's okay, there's no need for you to do that. You should get some rest."

"You too." Sanghyeok said, walking Jihoon to the door, "I hope you rest well."

Jihoon turned around to look at Sanghyeok as he passed through the doorway. For some reason it felt like he should say something. 'Make sure you finish your food.' 'Make sure you wash off the makeup properly.' 'Turn the heating on before you sleep.'

"Thank you." Jihoon said instead, "Goodnight."

~

He was back at the restaurant.

The smell of onions and something spicy wafted through the air and made his mouth water. Jihoon peeled a piece of shrimp quickly and easily. It was a lot easier the second time around. Instead of eating it, however, he reached over and dropped it into the bowl of the person sitting across from him. They smiled at him and spooned a generous helping of fragrant smelling chicken into his bowl in return.

Jihoon didn't bother eating. Instead, he peeled yet another piece of shrimp and dropped it into their bowl. The person laughed and the sound made his heart flutter. He peeled another, hoping he would get to hear that laugh again. This time, the person picked it up and placed it back in Jihoon's bowl.

"Eat."

"You eat first." Jihoon responded automatically.

The person tilted their head, "Isn't the point of having dinner together to eat at the same time?"

Jihoon gave in and dug into his food. It tasted better than he remembered. Or maybe watching someone else enjoy the food so much made it seem even more delicious. Jihoon kept a close eye on the person across from him. When they lifted the second piece of shrimp to their mouth Jihoon took it as his cue to peel another. They smiled at him when he dropped it into their bowl.

"You don't have to do that."

"If I don't, then you might find it too troublesome to eat," Jihoon found himself saying, "If you find it troublesome, you might eat less."

Jihoon peeled yet another piece of shrimp. Somehow it seemed to be almost effortless. He glanced down at his bowl, maybe the shrimp were larger than yesterday?

He froze. For the first time since he sat down he realized he couldn't see a single thing around him. He knew instinctively that he was at the restaurant. He knew he was holding a piece of shrimp, yet he couldn't see any of it. Jihoon's heart beat faster. The more he focused on the absence of visual input, the more disorienting his surroundings were. He stared down at his hands and found that he was in control of them now. It was just like people described.

Excitement coursed through his body. It was a prophetic dream. It was happening. It was real. Jihoon eagerly looked up to face the person sitting across from him again. He barely saw them smile before he was plunged back into darkness.

"No!" Jihoon sat up in a jolt and looked around to find himself awake in his hotel room. "Fuck!"

He flopped back down onto the bed and closed his eyes but it was too late to go back. The dream finally happened and Jihoon had to go and mess it up by getting too excited. He needed to stay calmer next time.

What did he remember from the dream?

It was all fading away already. Jihoon desperately grasped at any details he could remember even as the dream slipped away like sand between his fingers. He was at the restaurant. He was sure of that. He also remembered peeling shrimp for them. What did it mean? Did it mean his soulmate was at the restaurant that day? Or did it mean they also liked shrimp? Or maybe it meant they also liked Chinese food? Jihoon groaned. It was too vague.

What did they look like? Jihoon was sure they had spoken out loud but he couldn't even remember if it was a man or woman's voice. They had a nice laugh. Jihoon remembered that too. Even though he didn't remember what it sounded like, he remembered how it made him feel to hear it. He could feel the same warmth he felt in his dream even just by thinking about it. They also had a nice smile. A soft smile. A gentle smile. With rosy, pink lips.

Jihoon sat up again. Their lips. He remembered them. Vaguely. They were a natural pink color, but the color was vibrant enough that it had to be makeup. What else? Jihoon wracked his brain and was frustrated to realize he was missing something. There was something unique that would've given him a hint, but he couldn't remember what it was. The shape. Something about the shape.

He wandered out of his room and headed down to the lobby. He felt far too restless to go back to sleep now. He needed to remember. The air outside was crisp and cool. It felt nice on his skin but did nothing to help jog his memory. Maybe he just needed to go to that restaurant again. There had to be a reason the dream was set in the restaurant. Or maybe he should go to a different restaurant. After all, if his person already visited that one maybe they would be

less likely to go again. It was also possible they really liked the food and that's why it showed in his dream. In that case they would probably go back there.

A drop of water hit his forehead. Jihoon looked up with a startled expression and realized it was raining. The sky was clear yesterday, yet the rain only seemed to get heavier and heavier as Jihoon walked back to the hotel. The brisk walk turned into a full sprint as the rain continued to pick up. Jihoon would've sighed in relief at the sight of the hotel if he weren't so out of breath from running. He didn't even realize he walked that far.

His heart dropped when he reached into his pocket to feel the distinct lack of his keycard. It was way past the hour where the hotel doors would open to anyone. Without his keycard he was stuck outside until someone entered or exited and Jihoon could sneak through before the doors closed. Even if someone happened to open the door he wouldn't be able to get into his room anyway. It was all such a mess. The rain felt colder than before as Jihoon stared disbelievingly through the glass double doors of the hotel. The interior still glowed a bright and welcoming yellow but it was late enough that no one was sitting at the front desk anymore. It looked warm inside.

Jihoon pressed as close to the wall as he could, hoping the meager overhang would do something to block out the rain. He pulled out his phone and dialed his teammates' numbers one by one. Then his manager and coaches. No response. They must've been asleep already. Panic started to set in. If no one answered he would likely have to be out here until the hotel staff came back in the morning. At the very least he hoped someone would enter or exit so Jihoon could slip through the open doors. Even waiting in the lobby with wet clothes sounded like a dream compared to this.

He shivered. The rain was starting to soak through his jacket now. Too desperate to be hesitant, Jihoon searched through his contacts for anyone that might be able to help. His eye caught on Minseok's name. He was here at the hotel too. He would be able to help. Jihoon stared nervously at the screen as he dialed Minseok's number. Voicemail.

Damn it. That left Sanghyeok and Wooje. Jihoon instinctively pressed Sanghyeok's number and waited as the icon flashed on the screen.

"Hello?"

Relief flooded through him. “Hyung! I’m sorry if the timing is bad but I got locked out. Can you open the front doors for me?”

“I’ll be right down.”

The call disconnected. Jihoon slumped against the wall with a smile. He wouldn’t have to spend the night standing in the rain. There was something about Sanghyeok saying he would come and get Jihoon that filled him with comfort. Jihoon vaguely recalled someone saying that when Sanghyeok told you things would be okay you always believed they would be simply because it was Sanghyeok saying it. How true that statement was.

Even with the rain still pouring down on him, he somehow felt warm. Sanghyeok was coming to get him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I've been so busy lately but the kind comments always keep me pulling through 🥹

Luckily all this work means I'll have the money for the new world's champion merch they're dropping! It's so pretty but so expensive asdfghfjhgk but I need to get it since I wasn't able to get the world's uniforms ;-;

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Jihoon!”

Jihoon broke into a grin when the hotel doors finally slid open and Sanghyeok ran out to greet him. Warm air rushed around him yet somehow he found himself more fixated by the look of concern on Sanghyeok’s face instead. Had Sanghyeok ever looked at him like that before?

“Hyung! Don’t- you’ll get wet!” Jihoon held out a hand to stop him before Sanghyeok accidentally stepped out into the rain alongside him. Jihoon quickly walked through the doors and was relieved when they closed behind him to block out the chilly air. “I’m sorry about all this. I thought I had my keycard with me. No one else was picking up so I just called whoever I could…”

Sanghyeok’s brow creased slightly, the concerned expression not leaving his face, “Don’t apologize. I’m glad you called me. How long were you out there?”

“Not long.” Jihoon lied. Or was it a lie? Every minute in the freezing rain felt like an hour so he could hardly tell how long he was waiting. Either way, it was better to say it wasn’t long just to keep Sanghyeok from worrying. He followed Sanghyeok to the elevator and felt the relief fully sink in. He was inside. Even with his wet clothes he was just grateful he didn’t have to stand in the rain for another second.

“Which floor?” Sanghyeok asked.

“Five.”

Sanghyeok reached out to press the button but paused with a frown, “You said you didn’t have your keycard. How will you get into your room?”

Jihoon shrugged, “I’ll just go to one of the teammates’ rooms and knock. They’ll probably wake up if I knock loud enough.”

Sanghyeok looked at the buttons on the elevator, hand still hovering like he was unsure of what to do. “Or…you could just stay in my room.” He offered hesitantly, “That way you don’t have to wake anyone up.”

“Stay with you?” Jihoon asked, surprised. His heart beat a little faster.

“You can check with your teammates first of course.” Sanghyeok said quickly, “But just in case they don’t answer the door. You can come find me again. I just want to make sure you have a place to stay regardless.”

Sanghyeok pressed the button to the fifth floor and Jihoon cursed himself for hesitating when Sanghyeok made the offer. For some reason he really wanted to spend just a while longer in Sanghyeok’s presence, but now it would feel awkward to backtrack and say he wanted to stay with Sanghyeok. It was just a rare opportunity to spend time with him. Despite their paths always crossing, it seemed like they were never given a chance to just enjoy each other’s company as normal people. It seemed like every time they came face to face they had to carry the burden of the names on their backs.

“Would you like me to wait?” Sanghyeok offered as the elevator stopped at the fifth floor.

“No, it’s okay.” Jihoon said, shaking off his contemplations and reluctantly stepping out of the elevator.

“My room number is 703, just in case no one answers.” Sanghyeok reminded, “Text me when you get in safely. I’ll stay awake until you let me know just in case.”

“Thank you.” Jihoon smiled. He caught just a glimpse of Sanghyeok’s smile as the elevator doors closed and was struck by a sense of deja vu. He shook it off and headed towards Siwoo

and Gi-in's room. Of course Sanghyeok seemed familiar. They knew each other. It was probably because it was a long time since they last talked so familiarly.

Jihoon stood in front of the door and was suddenly struck by an intense dissatisfaction. It didn't feel right. No matter how he willed himself to knock, his hand didn't move. He looked back in the direction of the elevator. He wanted to go back. If he went back to that moment he would say yes when Sanghyeok offered. That way he wouldn't have to bother his teammates in the middle of the night. How embarrassing was it for him to do that? He didn't want to bother them. On the other hand, Sanghyeok was already awake. It wouldn't count as bothering if Jihoon went to him.

As if possessed, Jihoon turned and headed back to the elevator. He pushed the button to the seventh floor and tried not to think too much as the soft elevator music played. This made sense. He didn't want to bother his teammates. Plus he could save face. Siwoo would definitely make fun of him for getting locked out. It just seemed like the most painless option. Plus it gave him a chance to talk to Sanghyeok in a lower pressure situation. It was a win win.

He walked up to Sanghyeok's room and knocked lightly. Sanghyeok was at the door almost instantly this time. "No response?" He assumed, already stepping to the side to let Jihoon in.

"I couldn't get in." Jihoon said. Technically not a lie. "I didn't want to bother the neighbors by banging on the door too loudly either."

"Here." Sanghyeok didn't seem to question the awkward half truths Jihoon thought up even though Jihoon was sure his poor delivery was going to give him away. It seemed like Sanghyeok was already prepared just in case Jihoon came back to stay with him. He had a stack of towels already set on the table. He handed one to Jihoon and began to rummage through his luggage. Jihoon toweled off his hair as he watched Sanghyeok curiously.

Sanghyeok pulled out a sweatshirt and held it up, "Do you think this would fit you?"

Jihoon stooped down to take the sweatshirt. It would probably fit. Sanghyeok always wore clothing that was too big for him so it shouldn't be too difficult to find something large enough. Pants might be a bit more difficult though. Jihoon glanced back over to Sanghyeok

to find him staring blankly at Jihoon. Sanghyeok quickly looked away once he realized Jihoon caught him staring and continued to go through his suitcase of clothing.

Somehow Jihoon didn't really want to let it go. Sanghyeok was definitely staring. It wasn't like those awkward moments where two people just happened to look at each other at the same time. If it were just accidental eye contact Sanghyeok wouldn't have looked away so quickly. He wouldn't be fazed by something as trivial as that.

"Is there something on my face?" Jihoon blurted. It was a bit of a clumsy opening to take, but he couldn't think of any other way to bring it up.

Sanghyeok looked confused, "I don't think so?"

"It's just, uh," Jihoon cringed at his own awkwardness but it was too late to back out now, "You looked at me weird just now so…"

Sanghyeok looked embarrassed, "Sorry. I didn't mean to."

Explain. Jihoon willed him. *Explain why you were doing it. Come on.*

"It's just that-" Sanghyeok laughed sheepishly. He glanced back up at Jihoon and Jihoon tried his best not to look too excited that Sanghyeok was actually explaining. "I watched a k-drama with Minseokie on the plane ride here." Sanghyeok continued, "There was a very dramatic scene in the rain and for some reason I was reminded of it."

"Yeah?" Jihoon prompted, hoping the curious look on his face would encourage Sanghyeok to keep talking.

"I'm not sure why." Sanghyeok mused, "You just look like the actor I guess. Here, these pants might fit you. The bathroom is over there."

Jihoon took the pants reluctantly. For some reason he really wanted Sanghyeok to continue to elaborate on the whole “Jihoon reminding him of a k-drama scene” thing. Was it a good thing? Bad thing? What was the scene? Was the actor handsome? Was he the male lead or the childhood friend that always got rejected in the end?

“The pants belong to Minhyung so they should fit.” Sanghyeok took a plastic package out from his suitcase and held it out to Jihoon, “Take these too.”

Jihoon felt like his head was spinning. He wasn’t sure if he was more surprised by the fact that Sanghyeok kept Minhyung’s clothes in his suitcase or that Sanghyeok just handed him an unopened pack of men’s underwear. One of those was definitely easier to inquire about though.

“You have Minhyung’s clothing in your bag?” Jihoon asked.

“I pack a spare set of clothes for Minhyung, Wooje, and Minseok.” Sanghyeok said, “Hyeonjun and I can share clothes easily enough so it’s not a problem. Plus, Hyeonjun packs more than enough clothes for himself since he has a bit more of an eye for aesthetics.” A soft smile graced Sanghyeok’s face as he neatly packed the mess of clothes back into his suitcase, “He likes to pack a specific outfit for each day and then an extra one just in case.”

“I see.” Jihoon felt oddly envious of the warmth and fondness practically radiating off Sanghyeok as he talked about his teammate. “I’ll go change.”

He glanced down at Sanghyeok’s still open suitcase as he walked to the bathroom, catching sight of an unopened pack of plain looking socks. Jihoon couldn’t help but smile. Sanghyeok really did prepare for everything. It was lucky for him, he supposed. Otherwise he would either be stuck with no underwear or slightly damp underwear for the rest of the night. Jihoon considered a quick shower but quickly abandoned the thought when he caught sight of the time. It was already 2am.

Instead he was just grateful to finally get into dry clothing. Minhyung’s pants fit him decently and the sweatshirt was about the size of his own clothes. He pulled the plain black sweatshirt over his head and wondered if he was disappointed or relieved that it wasn’t some piece of T1 merch Sanghyeok was usually seen in. Either way, it was soft and smelled nice. A mix of fabric softener and something else.

“Everything fit okay?” Sanghyeok asked as Jihoon walked out of the bathroom.

“Just fine.” Jihoon said, “Thanks for helping. Why are you awake at this hour?”

“I fell asleep around the time you left but couldn’t stay asleep.” Sanghyeok shrugged, “What about you? What were you doing outside?”

“I didn’t realize how late it was.” Jihoon admitted, “I couldn’t sleep so I went on a walk to clear my head.”

Sanghyeok smiled, “It’s lucky I happened to be awake at this hour. Once again, I’m really glad you called me. Do you feel okay? I can heat up some water for you. I’ll turn up the heat too. You should get into bed and warm up.”

“I’m okay.” Jihoon said. More than okay. Something about the way Sanghyeok was fretting over him made him feel warm all over.

“Get under the blankets anyway.” Sanghyeok reached out like he was going to guide Jihoon to the bed but his hand stopped right before it made contact with Jihoon’s back. He lowered his hands again and nodded at the bed, “You can take the bed. Make sure you don’t get sick.”

Part of Jihoon was tempted to reassure Sanghyeok that he could be as familiar as he wanted with Jihoon. If he were Minseok, Sanghyeok would probably shove him towards the bed and forcefully bundle him up in the blankets. Jihoon glanced at the couch, which was already set up with a pillow and a blanket. If he were Minseok, Sanghyeok would probably sleep on the bed with him too. Jihoon suddenly felt guilty that Sanghyeok was kind enough to get up at 2am to let Jihoon in and then sleep on the couch so that he could have the bed.

“You don’t have to sleep on the couch.” Jihoon said.

“I don’t mind, really.” Sanghyeok reassured him, “The couch is pretty comfortable.”

“Then I can sleep there.” Jihoon pointed out.

Jihoon could almost see the courteous and polite side of Sanghyeok shudder at the suggestion. Outwardly however, Sanghyeok only winced slightly before smiling again, “The couch might not be long enough for you. Don’t worry about it. Just focus on warming up and getting some rest.”

“I’m already warmed up.” Jihoon said stubbornly. For some reason he decided he was dying on this hill. Sanghyeok wasn’t sleeping on the couch. Not if Jihoon could help it.

Sanghyeok sighed, “Jihoon-ah...”

Fuck. Something about the disapproving way Sanghyeok said his name made his willpower waver. Jihoon winced. He wasn’t sure which one was worse. Making Sanghyeok sleep on the couch when it was his room or having Sanghyeok use that tone with him again.

“I’m warm.” Jihoon said again, “You can check if you want.”

Impulsively, Jihoon held out his hand towards Sanghyeok. Once again, Sanghyeok moved instinctively to grab Jihoon’s hand but hesitated once his brain caught up to his actions. It was frustrating. Sanghyeok seemed inclined towards behaving in a comfortable and familiar way yet he kept stopping himself out of some misplaced sense of politeness. If he were Wooje, Sanghyeok would have grabbed his hands to make sure they weren’t cold even before he offered.

He felt a mix of frustration and yearning. Yearning for what, he still wasn’t sure. It just felt like he wanted something. Something he didn’t have yet. Frustration overriding his self control, Jihoon reached out and grabbed Sanghyeok’s still hesitant hand. Maybe if he showed familiarity first then Sanghyeok would respond in kind. His internal plotting about how to get on more familiar terms with Sanghyeok disappeared when he realized Sanghyeok’s hands were cold as ice.

“Your hands are freezing!” Jihoon said, turning to him with a dismayed expression.

“I’m okay-” Sanghyeok tried to pull his hand away but Jihoon only tightened his grip. Jihoon wasn’t sure what possessed him to do so, but he grabbed Sanghyeok’s other hand and clasped them in his own to warm them up. Sanghyeok gave Jihoon a slightly perplexed look but let Jihoon fulfill his bizarre whim with nothing more than a confused tilt of his head. He moved closer so that Jihoon could hold his hands more comfortably and let a peaceful silence settle over them.

Jihoon cradled Sanghyeok’s hands gently in his own, running his thumb idly over the veins snaking from his fingers and across the back of his hand. Sanghyeok had pretty hands. Pale white skin and elegant fingers. With how cold his hands were, Jihoon could almost believe they were made of ice. Beautiful and delicate.

Jihoon traced the pad of his thumb gently over Sanghyeok’s fingers. Something about them was just entracing to look at. If Jihoon ever took up a career as a sculptor, his “David” would have hands like Sanghyeok’s. Even when carved in unmoving stone, they would look graceful and deft. Strong and skillful. As perfect as the marble it was carved from.

But Sanghyeok’s fingers were so thin. No wonder they got cold so easily. Jihoon suddenly thought back to Sanghyeok’s unfinished dinner. He shouldn’t be leaving food unfinished when he was already so thin. Jihoon’s heart ached when he realized, if he were someone else, he could maybe change that. If he were Hyeonjun, he could’ve nagged Sanghyeok to finish his food. Then, if he didn’t finish his food again the next day, he could nag him again.

“It’s only my hands that get cold.” Sanghyeok said, breaking the silence, “You don’t have to trouble yourself, I have hand warmers for when I need them.”

Jihoon looked down at their still joined hands, feeling a bitter taste pool in his mouth at Sanghyeok’s words. If he were Minhyung, Sanghyeok wouldn’t protest or insist he was fine. He would smile in fond exasperation but let Minhyung warm his hands up without complaint simply because Minhyung wanted to do it. He wouldn’t try to be polite. He wouldn’t call the gesture “troubling yourself” if it were Minhyung doing it.

What was wrong with him? Jihoon shoved the intrusive thoughts out of his head. Of course he wasn't as close to Sanghyeok as his teammates were. That was a given. Why was he so hung up on it when he had no reason to be? It was obvious he wouldn't be that close with Sanghyeok. Not on a personal level anyway. They never really spent time with each other. They respected and understood each other on levels that meant more than trivial gestures of familiarity anyway.

So why did it bother him so much? Why did every breath feel heavy when Sanghyeok was near? Why did his chest ache with every heartbeat? Even holding Sanghyeok's hands in his own, Jihoon was filled with a biting feeling that he wasn't close enough. He wanted to be closer, but he didn't want it in a way a person wished for trivial things. He wanted it like a freezing man wanted warmth. He wanted it like flesh wanted to knit itself over a wound. He wanted it so much it was almost a need. Maybe it was. Something was telling him it was.

A gentle squeeze pulled him out of his thoughts.

"Are you alright?" The sound of Sanghyeok's voice instantly soothed Jihoon's mental turmoil. Sanghyeok looked up at him with concerned eyes and suddenly every urge and feeling made sense, because why would anyone not feel the same? Why wouldn't he feel that way when Sanghyeok's voice was warm as honey and cool as water? Why wouldn't he want to be closer if it meant those eyes would stare up at him like they were now? Why wouldn't he want a place in Sanghyeok's heart if it meant he had the ability to make those lips curve up into a smile?

"Jihoon?" Sanghyeok prompted.

"Your hands are still cold." Jihoon said. He wasn't sure what else to say. Amidst all the turmoil in his head, all he knew for certain was that he wanted to make sure Sanghyeok wasn't cold. The rest he could think about later.

Sanghyeok laughed, "Maybe your hands are just warm."

"You should've finished your dinner earlier." Jihoon found himself saying.

Sanghyeok blinked in surprise, “....dinner?”

“You shouldn’t sleep on the couch either.” Jihoon muttered. All the words seemed to come spilling out against his will. He looked away, feeling embarrassed, “I don’t know why I’m saying all this. The thoughts are just in my head.”

Sanghyeok regarded him quietly for a moment before he spoke, “You shouldn’t go out at night by yourself.”

Jihoon looked back at Sanghyeok in surprise, “Huh?”

“You should have better posture when you’re sitting at the table so you don’t hurt your back.” Sanghyeok continued, “And you should sleep on a proper mattress so you get a good night’s rest.”

Jihoon stared at Sanghyeok in speechless surprise and Sanghyeok averted his eyes to avoid his gaze. “I just thought I should express what I was thinking. Since you did the same.” Sanghyeok squeezed Jihoon’s hands one last time before letting go, “You should get some rest now.”

Jihoon was too stunned to protest when Sanghyeok turned and headed towards the couch. The things Sanghyeok said. The look on Sanghyeok’s face when he said them. All the thoughts in Jihoon’s head, maybe they were in Sanghyeok’s too. He swallowed the urge to argue and laid down in the empty bed. As his eyes slipped closed, all he could think about was the way Sanghyeok stood, peaceful and content, as Jihoon cradled his hands in his own. The moment was long and filled with silence, yet Sanghyeok didn’t try to move away. In the memory, Jihoon was sure Sanghyeok had a smile on his face.

~

Cold rain splattered harshly against Jihoon’s face. Water blurred his vision as he ran through the pouring rain. He was in the rain again, but this time he wasn’t running from it. He was running towards something. He must’ve been. Why else would he feel so excited?

Despite the rain soaking through his clothes he could feel himself smiling as he ran. His heart was pounding from the exertion and elation. And then there it was. The thing– no, the person– he was running towards.

They were holding an umbrella and their smile was as warm as the sun and just as radiant. A promise of warmth and protection. Shelter and love. Jihoon stopped right in front of them, still smiling. “Hi.”

“Jihoon-ah, get under the umbrella.” They chided. Their voice was just as warm as their smile.

Jihoon just smiled at them, a playful glint in his eyes, “But if I stand too close to you then you’ll get wet too.”

The person rolled their eyes and walked forward until the umbrella sheltered them both, “You’re ridiculous.”

“You’re beautiful.” Jihoon breathed.

The person ducked their head in embarrassment and Jihoon was struck with a sudden and inconsolable urge to kiss them. They were just so impossibly endearing. So adorable. So enchanting. Jihoon reached out and gently tilted their head upwards, his eyes asking a question he was too scared to say out loud. He closed the distance between them and felt the person place a hesitant hand on Jihoon’s chest. Jihoon caressed their cheek softly and a hesitant yet insistent tug on the front of his shirt told him it was okay to keep going.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Jihoon jolted awake in a confused flurry of limbs and blankets, floundering in an attempt to find his phone and shut off that awful beeping sound. By the time he located his phone the last remnants of his dream were already chased off by the glaring sound of responsibility. Jihoon groaned and flopped back onto the bed. Even if he couldn’t remember what he was

dreaming about, the annoyance and disappointment of consciousness told him it must've been a really good dream.

Wait. Jihoon shot out of bed again when he remembered where he was. His eyes immediately found the couch and a feeling of disappointment settled in his stomach when he saw that it was completely empty. There wasn't even a pillow or blanket to hint at the fact that someone slept there the previous night. Sanghyeok must've already left for the day.

His pillow was placed neatly back onto the bed next to Jihoon and his blanket was…

Jihoon swallowed, feeling oddly emotional when he realized that the blanket Sanghyeok had used was now draped over Jihoon. It was layered over the other blanket in a way that was too neat to be unintentional. Jihoon touched the blanket like that would somehow give him an explanation as to why it was there. He bundled the blankets around him and shut his eyes. An achingly familiar warmth surrounded him and seeped all the way down to his bones. The familiarity of it gave him the feeling he was missing something important.

It was probably nothing.

He had an extra blanket. Of course he felt warmer. That was all. Nothing else.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoy this chapter! I really struggled to portray the essence I wanted to but I hope it turned out well. All the comments are loved and appreciated and really help get me through having a busy time at work AND stressing over off-season news :`)

Let's all survive roster announcements! Fighting!

(Zeus Guma please re-sign Chovy don't go to the LPL please thanks)

(Ruler please go to a good team and be happy)

(BLG please stay together)

(TOM PLAESE RE-SIGN TOO THANKS)

I miss Roach already what do I do....

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Why do you keep staring at the waitress?”

“I’m not staring.”

Siwoo raised an eyebrow, “I’m not blind.”

Jihoon just shrugged, looking back at his plate now. It wasn’t her. The color of her lips were too bright. “I was looking at the decor?” Jihoon said, his attempt at a lie sounding bad even to himself.

Siwoo rolled his eyes, “Yeah, and I suppose the decor was walking across the room then?”

“Jihoon hyung was probably looking at the row of pictures going across the wall.” Suhwan defended him, “It’s a very nicely decorated restaurant. The food is good too.”

“You stared at the hostess earlier too.” Siwoo accused, not dropping the topic.

“I didn’t.” Jihoon mumbled, taking a bite of his food. It wasn’t her either. The shade of her lipstick was too pink.

“Hot jasmine tea?” A cheerful voice interrupted.

“Over here,” Siwoo called, gesturing at Gi-in, “It’s his order.”

Jihoon studied the new waitress's lips carefully. The shade looked correct. Maybe a bit too unnatural. It was too obvious she was wearing lip color. Then again, makeup wore out during the day and last time he came to the restaurant it was much later at night. No. The shape wasn't right either. Even if Jihoon couldn't picture the smile on his soulmate's face, he was sure it wasn't the one he saw the waitress wearing right now.

"See, you're doing it again!" Siwoo pointed out once the waitress left, "What's up with you? You having girl problems or….?"

Jihoon shot Siwoo a half-hearted glare, "Don't even joke about that. Imagine someone overhears and takes it out of context."

"Hyung! Try this dish!" Suhwan interrupted, "It's really good. Do you think I could cook it at home?"

Siwoo shook his head fondly, "Suhwan-ah. I say this with all the love in my heart but I think you should stay out of the kitchen."

Geonbu snorted, "That applies to all of us. There's a reason the kitchen at the dorms is spotless. It's just decorative at this point."

"Maybe we should have the stove removed." Gi-in considered, "It's just a fire hazard."

Suhwan caught Jihoon's gaze and smiled. Jihoon gave him a grateful nod. It wasn't Siwoo's fault he didn't know his teasing was a sore subject for Jihoon, it was lucky Suhwan caught on and changed the subject. That freed Jihoon to mope over his bowl of rice as he thought back to all the lips he stared at today. Not a single person he looked at seemed to match what he knew about his soulmate. He stared down every employee and every person he saw order the shrimp dish. Nothing.

Maybe he remembered the color of their lips wrong? He was sure it looked natural yet he was also sure the person was wearing makeup. Jihoon peeled a piece of shrimp and lamented the fact that he didn't do it as efficiently as the dream version of him did. There must've been a

reason the dream was set in the restaurant, but coming back to the restaurant didn't give him any clues.

A peeled piece of shrimp dropped into his bowl.

"Jihoonie?" Siwoo prompted, "Are you alright?"

Jihoon made a face, "Stop giving me that concerned expression. It's creepy."

Siwoo made an overexaggerated offended expression, "How dare you. I was so concerned that I peeled a shrimp for you! Don't I even get a thank you?"

"Minseokie peeled two for me yesterday." Jihoon countered with a cheeky smile. He popped the shrimp Siwoo peeled for him into his mouth anyway.

"Since when is Minseok peeling shrimp for you?" Siwoo grumbled, "It's always the supports. I can't believe you called him "Minseokie" AND bragged about all the things he did for you. Right in front of my salad."

"You're not eating salad." Geonbu pointed out, confused. Gi-in put a hand on Geonbu's arm and just shook his head. Geonbu gave him a questioning look and Gi-in tried his best to fight back the fond smile threatening to creep onto his face.

"Hyung, that phrase is outdated." Suhwan told him.

"Is it? Well, I don't really like the current slang going around." Siwoo complained, "Can't I stick to what I like?"

"You're going to sound old, hyung."

“Old? Me? I don’t look a day over 20!” Siwoo said with a grin.

“None of us do. We only see the sun twice a year when they force us to film outside.” Suhwan said matter of factly.

Siwoo ruffled Suhwan’s hair affectionately, “ *You* don’t look over 20 because you’re *actually* a child. Look at you using the royal ‘we’ like you’re all grown up. It feels like just the other day you were asking me what feminine products were-”

“Hyung!” Suhwan protested.

“Our Suhwan is all grown up-”

“Stop it!” Suhwan complained, “Let’s eat our food before it gets cold.”

“Awwww look at you making sure your hyungs are eating, you really are all grown up-”

“Siwoo hyuuuung…” Suhwan complained.

Siwoo laughed, “Fine. I’ll stop. Here, try this.” He passed two pieces of peeled shrimp into Suhwan’s bowl with a smile.

Gi-in nudged Siwoo, “So he gets two and I get one?”

“I gotta feed him so he grows!”

“I also only got one.” Jihoon reminded.

“Why are you guys complaining? I didn’t get any.” Geonbu grumbled.

“Junglers eat last~” Siwoo said with an unapologetic smile.

“Adc gets red buff. Midlaner gets blue buff. Toplaner gets krugs or gromp. Enemy jungler gets raptors…..” Geombu muttered as he peeled a piece of shrimp for himself.

Siwoo rolled his eyes and dropped a piece of peeled shrimp into Geonbu’s bowl, “I’ll treat you for dessert. You too Suhwan.”

“I think I’ll just head back to the hotel after this.” Jihoon said. After a day of practice and the disappointment of trying to locate his soulmate he really wasn’t in the mood to stay out any longer than he needed to. It was a futile effort anyway, dragging his teammates to the same restaurant he went to yesterday.

Jihoon sighed as he began to walk back himself. It was the only hint he had, he would’ve regretted it even more if he didn’t at least try. The rest of the information he had was far too vague. Pink lips and a pretty smile? That could feasibly apply to a majority of the adult population.

A drop of rain hit his nose.

Another drop landed onto his forehead and Jihoon groaned. He sped up towards the hotel and hoped he would get there before the rain picked up too much. He wasn’t quite so lucky. Jihoon broke into a sprint as sheets of water began to cascade down onto him.

“Jihoon-ah.”

Jihoon froze. What was that?

“ *Get under the umbrella.”*

The image of a fond smile flashed through his head. Jihoon closed his eyes and clung onto the memory. It was important. He knew it was. What was he forgetting? The rain. He was in the rain. When was he in the rain? Jihoon felt a dull pain in the back of his head as he tried desperately to remember what he was forgetting.

"You're ridiculous."

"You're beautiful."

The pounding in his head seemed to get worse and worse with each passing second. A warm smile. A soft touch. A kiss he was never given a chance to taste.

For some reason, the feeling of the rain slowly soaking through his clothes left him with a feeling of melancholy happiness. Jihoon growled in frustration as the pieces still refused to come together. He was in the rain and he was happy. But why? The incoherent ghost of a happy memory only made the rain pelting him now feel all the more depressing. The familiar feeling of pouring rain unearthed memories he didn't even know he had and left him with a deep sense of dissatisfaction that he was no longer living in that dream-like happiness.

Dream.

Jihoon's eyes flew open again. It was a dream. Another one. What happened in it? It was raining and…..and…….

Even though he wasn't normally a violent person he had the sudden urge to punch something. The memories hovered just beyond his conscious reach. Close enough that he knew they existed but too far for him to glean information from. Jihoon knew one thing though: It was another prophetic dream, and he and his soulmate were happy.

The empty sidewalk yawned ahead of him and Jihoon suddenly found himself breaking into a sprint. He closed his eyes and focused on the sensation of cold rain hitting his face. He was running in the pouring rain. He was excited. He was smiling. The person was smiling back.

Something caught on his foot and Jihoon was given a rude reminder that running with his eyes closed was definitely not the smartest thing to do. His eyes flew open in time for him to catch himself from falling face first into the concrete. Somehow, even as Jihoon sat in a shallow puddle with a burning pain spreading down his elbow, he found himself laughing out loud.

He leaned back and tilted his head up to watch the rain fall. Rainwater blurred his vision and he closed his eyes again. The memories flooded back to him clearer this time. The person with the umbrella smiled at him warmly and affectionately. They spoke to him lovingly and Jihoon lamented the fact that he couldn't remember the sound of their voice.

The picturesque scene played out again in his head. His soulmate lifted the umbrella to shelter them both. Jihoon reached out and touched their face. They placed a hand on his chest. Jihoon tilted their head upwards and they tugged on his shirt to give him permission to steal a kiss. Jihoon clung onto the feeling of loving and being loved for as long as he could before irritation crept into his head again. If it weren't for his alarm he would've had the memory of an unrealistically perfect kiss to treasure in his mind.

The sound of footsteps reminded Jihoon that he was still in fact in public. Jihoon quickly pushed himself off the floor and started walking again, ignoring the odd look the couple walking past gave him. Even embarrassment couldn't taint his current good mood. Even if a kiss in a dream wouldn't have counted anyway, the dream being interrupted only meant Jihoon would experience his first kiss in person. That was okay with him too.

A giddy feeling bubbled up in his chest as he cataloged all the things he learned. He ran into his soulmate again yesterday, presumably while he was walking in the rain at some point. That meant his soulmate walked the same route he did. His soulmate had a kind and soft voice, even though Jihoon still couldn't remember enough to determine their gender. They were shorter than Jihoon, but not a difference as drastic as Minhyung and Minseok. Just enough that they had to look up at him and he had to lean down to kiss them.

Warm air and soft music greeted him as he walked into the hotel. Enough other people were soaked and waterlogged that Jihoon didn't stand out too much for tracking water all over the tile floor. The melodious sound of a delicately tuned piano played out a familiar melody. It seemed like this hotel not only had korean speaking staff, served korean food, but also played korean music. No wonder Korean players and fans always preferred to stay at this place.

The good mood fizzled out when he pulled the door of his hotel room open to a flood of water over his shoes.

"What the f-" Jihoon jumped back and stared in disbelief as a small stream of water continued to trickle out from his room. It was a mess inside. The entire carpet was wet and soggy. His suitcase, which he had left on the floor, was dripping in water. Jihoon sifted through his things only to find every article of clothing to be damp and musty smelling. He glanced at the bed, the only part of the room spared by the flood of water.

On top of the bed was the clothing he borrowed from Sanghyeok yesterday. Jihoon had thrown them onto the bed this morning when he changed back into his own clothing. The clothing would have to suffice for now.

After he changed out of his wet clothes, Jihoon headed back down to the lobby and prepared himself to confront the receptionist. This whole situation felt like an advanced version of informing the waiter that they got the order wrong. Except in this situation, the alternative was to sleep in a bed surrounded by a shallow pool of dusty smelling water. Everytime he walked to the bathroom or left the room his feet would get wet.

Jihoon took a deep breath and approached the lady at the front desk, "Hi, I'm from room 513. It seems like the room was flooded somehow? Is it possible to change rooms?"

"Oh no!" The lady gasped, "I'll let our maintenance staff know. I can search for a replacement room for you. Free of charge of course. I'm very sorry about the inconvenience."

"No worries." Jihoon said politely. He stood around awkwardly as she tapped away at her computer. The lobby seemed pretty empty now. All the waterlogged people must already be in their rooms showering and getting warm. Jihoon would be doing that too if not for the unfortunate state of his room. Even though he was still agitated and cold, the soft piano music alongside the sound of rain pattering against the roof produced a strangely serene atmosphere. It was almost pleasant enough for him to forget that his socks were wet.

"I'm so sorry, it looks like all the rooms are booked," The receptionist said apologetically, "Did you travel with anyone? Maybe you can share a room with them for the time being?

We'll refund the cost of your room as well."

Jihoon frowned, "There aren't any rooms at all?"

She shook her head, "No. I think there's an event happening in this area soon? All the rooms are booked for weeks. I can check with our sister hotel to see if they have any open spots. That location is only a 20 minute drive from here."

Jihoon grimaced. Did that mean he had to share a room with two other people for until MSI was over? Sleeping on the ground or couch for that long definitely didn't sound very appealing. Maybe they would be able to find a different hotel to book a room in.

"Jihoon?"

Jihoon turned around to see Sanghyeok walking towards him. He had a curious look on his face as he glanced from him to the receptionist, "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, just sorting something out." Jihoon said.

Sanghyeok tilted his head, "What happened?"

"My room flooded," Jihoon sighed.

"Oh." Sanghyeok frowned, "How bad was it?"

"Bad enough that these were the only dry clothes I have," Jihoon said sheepishly, "Sorry, I was going to return them today."

Sanghyeok glanced over the outfit Jihoon was wearing with a smile, “You can keep it for as long as you want. I don’t mind. The pants are Minhyung’s size but I’m the one that bought them to keep as a spare. He won’t miss them.”

Jihoon felt a slight fluttering in his chest at the way Sanghyeok looked him up and down, even if it was just a fleeting glance. “And the sweatshirt?” Jihoon asked.

Sanghyeok shrugged, “I’m not too attached to it. There’s no need to stress about returning the clothes.”

The receptionist cleared her throat and they both turned to look at her. She looked even more apologetic than before, “I’m so sorry, there aren’t open rooms in our other location either. I’m really sorry. Maintenance said that there was a leaky pipe in your room and while it can be fixed tomorrow the condition of the room will still be less than satisfactory. We can’t get the carpet replaced in such short notice. If you want to stay in the room you’re still welcome to with no charge at all.”

Jihoon considered the option, “The pipe can be fixed tomorrow?”

She nodded, “Yes, we can have someone in before noon. The leakage should be solved before 2pm. We can also do our best to dry out the carpeting but I’m afraid there’s a limit on what can be done on that front. I’m sorry once again, I’ll have your refund processed as soon as possible so that you can book with another hotel if you want to.”

“Thank you.” Jihoon said with a polite smile.

“Are you heading back to your room?” Sanghyeok asked as Jihoon turned away from the front desk. Jihoon was surprised to still see him waiting there.

“I’ll have to get my luggage out and salvage what I can,” Jihoon said.

“Where are you staying tonight then?” Sanghyeok asked, walking alongside Jihoon as he headed towards the elevator.

“Probably in one of my teammates’ rooms.” Jihoon said, unable to resist making a face. As much as he would’ve been happy to sleep on the couch last night so that Sanghyeok wouldn’t have to, the couch *did* look far too short to be comfortable.

“Did you want to stay with me again tonight?” Sanghyeok offered.

Jihoon repeated the words in his head just to make sure he heard Sanghyeok correctly. Excitement fluttered in his chest and he almost blurted out a “yes” before he remembered his manners. Jihoon schooled his expression into a neutral look, “Really? I wouldn’t want to bother you.”

“It’s no bother at all.” Sanghyeok said with a smile, “I’m happy to help.”

Jihoon bit his tongue. Should he refuse again out of politeness? Or should he take the opening? The polite thing to do would be to mention that he could stay with his teammates, but if he suggested it it might come off as Jihoon being uncomfortable staying with Sanghyeok. In that case Sanghyeok wouldn’t push the offer anymore.

No, this was ridiculous. Since when did he have to be overly polite with Sanghyeok anyway? They weren’t strangers, Jihoon shouldn’t have to overthink these things. He returned the smile, “Thank you hyung, you’ve saved me two nights in a row.”

Sanghyeok laughed, turning away like he was suddenly very invested in the pattern of the carpet. “That’s a generous interpretation.”

Was he….embarrassed?

Jihoon’s eyes lit up as he took in the awkwardly bashful look on Sanghyeok’s face. He *was* embarrassed. Was it because Jihoon praised him? Jihoon would have to remember that.

“Wait out here so you don’t get your shoes wet,” Jihoon said when they finally made it to his room, “I’ll go get my things really quick.”

“Do you need help carrying anything?” Sanghyeok called after him.

“No.” Jihoon said immediately despite the fact that help would definitely have been very nice. He piled his duffel bag awkwardly onto his suitcase and held his backpack in his other hand. It would be more manageable if he could just wear his backpack, but he didn’t want to get his clothes wet.

“Let me carry your backpack for you.” Sanghyeok offered again as they headed back to the elevator.

“No.” Jihoon said again, “It’s wet.”

“You remind me of Hyeonjun you know,” Sanghyeok commented, “He never lets anyone carry things for him.”

Jihoon glanced to the side to catch the glowing look of adoration on Sanghyeok’s face as he talked about Hyeonjun, “He doesn’t let anyone carry things for themselves either.” Sanghyeok said with a laugh, “He doesn’t offer to carry it, he’ll just walk over and take it out of your hands.”

Jihoon found himself smiling. The person Sanghyeok was talking about with that adoring look on his face was the person Sanghyeok just compared Jihoon to. At this point he was too smug about that fact to feel envious of Hyeonjun the way he was yesterday.

Sanghyeok opened the door and held it for Jihoon as he hauled his still soaking bags inside. “You can leave it in the bathroom so the water doesn’t get onto the carpet.” Sanghyeok said, “I’ll help you wash everything out so we can have it clean and dry by tomorrow.”

Jihoon set his bags down with a relieved sigh. “I’m not making you wash my clothes hyung.”

“You can wash them and I’ll dry them?” Sanghyeok offered.

Jihoon couldn’t help but smile, “Hyung, that’s really not what I meant. I meant I can deal with my own stuff. Don’t worry about it. I’ll probably just send it to a laundromat tomorrow.”

“You can borrow some clean clothes for tonight then,” Sanghyeok offered, immediately switching gears into the next best way he could help. Jihoon couldn’t help feeling warm inside once again at Sanghyeok’s genuine care and concern.

“Thank you hyung.” Jihoon said sincerely.

Sanghyeok froze for a moment, eyes locked with Jihoon, before he quickly moved to rummage through his suitcase. Was he embarrassed again? It was just too endearing. How could someone like Sanghyeok feel shy when given a simple thanks?

“Here.” Sanghyeok shoved a clean shirt and pants at Jihoon. “You should take a shower too. Make sure the water is hot so that you don’t get sick after getting rained on.”

“How did you know I got rained on?” Jihoon asked, surprised.

“Your hair is still a little damp.” Sanghyeok said, glancing up at Jihoon’s hair. Jihoon grimaced, his hair was probably a mess. Sanghyeok didn’t seem to notice though, “Have you eaten already? I can order something while you wash up.”

“We can go to the restaurant downstairs after I shower.” Jihoon found himself saying despite the fact that he had just eaten not even an hour ago. “I can buy you dinner to repay you for helping me out.”

“There’s no need for that.” Sanghyeok said with an amused smile, “I said I was happy to help.”

“Well, then I’m happy to buy you food.” Jihoon countered, suddenly feeling bold, “Let me treat you hyung, otherwise I’ll feel bad.”

“Alright.” Sanghyeok gave in, glancing away, “Go wash up.”

Jihoon smiled brightly, “Okay hyung. Wait for me. I’ll be quick.”

Jihoon ducked into the bathroom and turned on the water. Anticipation thrummed under his skin as he rushed to wash up so he could see Sanghyeok again. Through all the excitement and impatience, Jihoon barely even paid attention to the once distressing sight of the rainbow letters on his arm.

Chapter End Notes

Posting early because I write to cope and also I thought maybe it would cheer some people up after the news today :`)

I'll continue writing for ZOFGK and they'll always exist within my stories no matter what. I've discontinued the ZOFGK piece I started previously since it held too many memories, but I'll be starting up a new one soon(ZOFGK royalty au ft. choker). It's loosely inspired by "heavy is the crown" just because I thought writing something inspired by the things they achieved would feel less bittersweet and more healing. I've seen a flood of fans saying they're leaving altogether. I understand it, but I also hope we can all find a way to heal and continue to support both ZOFGK and 2025 T1 instead.

I won't ramble too much, but I have my thoughts on everything here: https://x.com/babysolosis/status/1859213667679821844

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jihoon stood in front of the mirror for far longer than he intended to. Should he dry his hair? Or leave it as it was? He hadn't really used a hair dryer before, so he wasn't sure how his hair would end up looking after. If he kept it wet maybe it would look too messy. Then again, Sanghyeok said he looked like an actor from a k-drama last time his hair was wet.

Was that a good thing though? He still wasn't sure. The comparison could've meant many different things. On an impulse, Jihoon searched up the media catalog of the airline they flew with. He was fairly certain both LCK teams flew with the same company. By some miracle, there were only two k-dramas listed as available for watching. Jihoon typed the title of each into the search bar with "rain scene" tacked onto it.

"Bus stop rain scene."

Not that one.

"Confession scene in the rain."

Jihoon clicked on it and a clip of a dejected looking girl began to play. A voice called what Jihoon assumed was her name and she turned around to see someone running towards her. Jihoon almost laughed out loud when he saw that he was wearing plaid pajama pants and an unremarkable t-shirt. Maybe that was what reminded Sanghyeok of Jihoon, not the fact that the actor was unrealistically handsome for someone standing in pouring rain.

Why was he fussing about this anyway? He was never really the type to dress up and try to look nice when he went out with friends. Maybe it was just because it was Sanghyeok. It would be surprising if any player in the LCK wouldn't want to make a good impression on Sanghyeok. Jihoon settled for leaving his hair slightly damp and quickly got dressed. The shirt fit a bit closer to his body than he was used to but still surprisingly loose despite the fact that it was Sanghyeok's shirt he was borrowing. Did Sanghyeok wear anything that was actually his size?

“Sorry for the wait.” Jihoon said as he walked out of the bathroom.

Sanghyeok looked up to give him a smile. He already looked ready to go, and had a pair of slippers laid out on the ground. “These are the only shoes I have that are dry. Sorry about the logo.”

“It’s okay hyung,” Jihoon said as he put on the T1 branded slippers. Was there anything that this company didn’t make? He supposed that if T1 produced it, Sanghyeok would wear it by default. It was free advertising if they simply ensured every article of clothing on his body had their logo on it.

“You can also borrow one of my jackets in case you’re cold.” Sanghyeok said, gesturing at one of his open suitcases. “I don’t know how well they’ll fit, but I tend to wear larger sizes.”

“I noticed.” Jihoon said with a small smile. He smelt down next to the suitcase and glanced over the different jackets folded neatly in a pile. A familiar looking denim jacket caught his eye and he lifted it out of the suitcase. A small laugh escaped his throat as he imagined himself walking out the door in a jacket with “Faker one and only” plastered on the back.

“Do you like that one?” Sanghyeok asked, voice light with laughter.

“It’s pretty.” Jihoon said.

“You can have it then.” Sanghyeok said, eyes sparkling with a childlike playfulness, “I don’t know if you should wear it in public though.”

Jihoon felt a sting of disappointment at that, “Why not?”

Sanghyeok glanced from the jacket to Jihoon, “You never know how the public can perceive things.”

“I bet if anyone else wore this jacket no one would bat an eye.” Jihoon said, resisting the urge to pout like a child.

Sanghyeok met his gaze with a meaningful look, “You’re not just anyone Jihoon-ah.”

Jihoon knew Sanghyeok was talking about his position professionally, yet the words still stirred something in his chest. They made him feel special in a way even the whole world singing his praise couldn’t. Jihoon smiled, “I mean, I’m already wearing the slippers. Might as well complete the set.”

Sanghyeok laughed, “Social media will be a battleground for days if you do.”

“Or, it would settle the feud between our fans.” Jihoon suggested.

“I guess I should wear something of yours to show it’s mutual then?” Sanghyeok joked. Despite the fact that it was obviously a joke, Jihoon couldn’t help but curse the fact that all of his clothes were currently soaked with rusty pipe water. It would’ve been a fun and meaningful thing to do. It was like the classic jersey exchange teams always did at internationals, but more private and less superficial.

Jihoon reluctantly set down the denim jacket. He picked up a plain looking black jacket and pulled it on, “Ready to go?”

“Just one more thing,” Sanghyeok gestured at the table, “I picked that up for you. Keep it with you just in case.”

Jihoon picked it up. “An umbrella?”

“Just in case you wanted to go out for a walk again. So you don’t get rained on.” Sanghyeok busied himself with making sure he had his phone and keycard, giving him an excuse to

avoid Jihoon's gaze, "I picked it up at the store downstairs while I was making a reservation at the restaurant."

Jihoon was torn between being grateful for Sanghyeok's foresight and kicking himself for not thinking about it. Of course he should've called to make a reservation. Jihoon shook off the feeling and gave Sanghyeok a bright smile, "Thanks for the umbrella, if I accept this then it means you can't say no next time I give you a gift. Deal?"

Sanghyeok's expression was a jumble of flustered surprise, "Gift? Why would- Don't worry about it. It's just an umbrella, don't feel obligated to return the favor."

"I won't take it unless you promise you'll let me give you something in return." Jihoon threatened playfully.

Sanghyeok fought back a smile, "Alright. But if I find you soaked with rain again tomorrow I'll be upset at you."

"You won't." Jihoon promised. As if he'd miss any chance to use the umbrella Sanghyeok gifted him.

They headed down to the restaurant in the hotel. The comfortable and playful atmosphere between them made Jihoon feel like he was floating on a cloud. The last time he even approached this level of familiarity with Sanghyeok was back at the Asia games, and that was with a bunch of other people around. He was glad to see that even with just the two of them nothing had changed or become awkward.

"Reservation for Lee Sanghyeok?" Sanghyeok said smoothly, the smile on his face as he spoke giving him an air of maturity. He somehow managed to make the most trivial of actions captivating. Jihoon once again felt conflicted between being charmed by Sanghyeok and berating himself for not being the one to show that side of himself. If he had been the one to announce his name with a confident smile, would it be Sanghyeok feeling charmed as he watched?

“It’s nice that they serve Korean food here too,” Sanghyeok commented after they placed their orders, “I remember a long time ago, traveling for events meant that I wouldn’t be able to eat food I was used to for weeks. Popularization of Asian cuisine is a blessing.”

Jihoon snorted, “A long time ago? You’re not that old hyung.”

“Perhaps not, but this industry makes me feel that way sometimes,” Sanghyeok said with a laugh, “A few more years and I’ll be old enough to pass for the new players’ father.”

Jihoon rolled his eyes, “You’ve barely aged a year in over a decade. I think you’ve got another 20 years at least before you even look over 30.”

“Perhaps it’s my mannerisms that give away my age then?” Sanghyeok suggested.

Jihoon watched as Sanghyeok poured a small splash of tea into the cup and wiped it down with a napkin before properly filling it to the brim with tea. Jihoon couldn’t help but smile, maybe it really was his mannerisms that gave him that air of maturity. “Could be.” Jihoon agreed.

“Minseokie seems to have an issue with how I take photos.” Sanghyeok recalled, “He always says the age that doesn’t show in my face shows in my social media presence.”

Jihoon laughed, endeared by the earnest way Sanghyeok contemplated Minseok’s complaints. “Minseok has an issue with how you take photos of yourself,” Jihoon corrected, “I think that’s just because he’s really good at taking selcas.”

Sanghyeok tipped his head, “What’s wrong with how I do it?”

Jihoon resisted the urge to laugh out loud by the genuine confusion on Sanghyeok’s face. For someone that took such well framed and picturesque photos of his teammates, it was absurd how he couldn’t see the issue with his own photos. “I think you have the angle wrong.” Jihoon said, successfully keeping a straight face, “You need to have the camera higher.”

“I see.” Sanghyeok looked thoughtful.

The conversation tapered out once their food arrived. Despite the fact that Jihoon already ate earlier, he still made an effort to make a dent in his meal. Once again, Sanghyeok seemed to make the most mundane actions eye-catching. He stuffed food into his mouth until his cheeks were full before diligently chewing the entire mouthful. Jihoon resisted the urge to ask Sanghyeok why he did that.

Reflexes honed through years of gaming kicked in as Jihoon successfully looked away right as Sanghyeok glanced up, quick enough that Sanghyeok wouldn’t have seen him staring. A pair of chopsticks entered his field of vision as Sanghyeok placed a piece of beef onto his plate, “Try this.”

Jihoon must’ve stared at the piece of meat for one second too long, because Sanghyeok instantly looked embarrassed. He reached out like he wanted to take the offering back but didn’t know if that would be even more odd. Sanghyeok cleared his throat, “Sorry, I’m used to doing that with my teammates. I know not everyone is comfortable sharing food.”

“Here.” Jihoon picked up a piece of pork from his plate and passed it over, “Try mine too then.”

The tension melted from Sanghyeok’s nervous gaze and he once again smiled, “Thank you.”

The air of comfortable familiarity stayed with them for the rest of dinner. Jihoon refilled Sanghyeok’s tea every time his cup went empty and Sanghyeok hailed the waiter for more water when there was nothing but ice left in their glasses. Jihoon shoved more food onto Sanghyeok’s plate and was pleasantly surprised to see him eat it all. For someone so thin it was a miracle he could eat that much. Where did all that food go? His cheeks maybe. Jihoon was tempted to poke them just to see if Sanghyeok had any more food stored up.

“Ready to go?” Sanghyeok asked.

Jihoon frowned, “Don’t we have to pay the bill first?”

“I told them to put it on my tab when I made the reservation,” Sanghyeok said nonchalantly as he began to walk out of the restaurant. He stopped and looked back at Jihoon when Jihoon didn’t follow immediately, “Jihoon?”

Jihoon snapped out of his daze and quickly followed along, a sulky expression on his face. “I thought I was paying. I’m supposed to be treating you to thank you for all your help.”

Sanghyeok waved off the complaint, “I always pay when I get dinner with friends.”

“I wanted to repay you for helping.” Jihoon said again, still sulky, “Now I just feel worse since you’ve done me yet another favor.”

“Can you teach me how to take a photo then?” Sanghyeok asked, expression completely serious despite the out of pocket request.

“What?” Jihoon had to take a second to make sure he heard Sanghyeok correctly, “I don’t think I’m the best person for that. You should ask Minseok.”

“You won’t show me then?” The smallest twinge of disappointment visible in the twitch of Sanghyeok’s lips urged every cell in Jihoon’s body to give him whatever he wanted.

“I can if you want me to.” Jihoon said, backtracking, “I just won’t be as good at it.”

Sanghyeok’s expression brightened and he walked over to stand next to Jihoon. Jihoon’s heart skipped a beat when he realized Sanghyeok meant he should take a photo of the two of them. Right now. Turned out Jihoon wasn’t quite as immune to the allure of Sanghyeok’s existence as he thought he was, because his heart continued to beat loudly as he pulled out his phone and held it up. Sanghyeok leaned closer until his cheek almost touched Jihoon’s shoulder.

Jihoon barely remembered how to smile before he took the photo. Sanghyeok looked at the photo with a thoughtful expression, completely unaware of Jihoon's current distress. Jihoon was always a little bit proud of the fact that he wasn't intimidated by Sanghyeok's presence the way so many other players were. By the way his heart was racing now, however, maybe he still harbored a little bit of that nervousness.

"Send me that photo?" Sanghyeok asked.

"Of course." Jihoon said, glad that Sanghyeok finally looked away as he turned to unlock the door. He definitely should've been desensitized to Sanghyeok's presence after how many times they played against each other. He wondered why he suddenly felt so nervous.

"Did you have anything else planned for the day?" Sanghyeok inquired, "You can take the room key if you'd like, I don't plan on going out again tonight."

Jihoon considered the question, gazing at the keycard Sanghyeok offered him with a sense of disquiet. He didn't want to take it. He wanted to stay in the room with Sanghyeok's quiet yet all too beguiling presence. Despite everything about Sanghyeok being plain and candid, Jihoon was still struck by the feeling that he was missing something. Something he could potentially discover if he stayed just a while longer.

He took the keycard.

"Thank you hyung," The words felt dry in his mouth. "I won't be out for too long."

The knowledge that he should go find his teammates before they went looking for him and discovered his flooded room didn't make it any easier to turn away from Sanghyeok and walk towards the door. Jihoon wasn't a particularly paranoid person, yet he was filled with a stinging anxiety that his situation would be found out. If his teammates knew his room flooded, there was no doubt they would insist he stay with them. Or they would tell the manager, and Jihoon would be whisked off to some other place to stay. After all, it was difficult to justify wanting to stay with a player from an enemy team.

He turned back to glance at Sanghyeok once more as he left. Sanghyeok was sitting on the couch, already absorbed in whatever book he was reading. He had legs curled up to his chest and the book balanced delicately on his knees. Jihoon smiled, the anxiety in his chest finally quieting. Maybe he had to leave now, but sight of Sanghyeok reading so peacefully made him feel certain that he would get to come home to Sanghyeok at the end of the day.

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“Why do you keep checking your phone?”

Jihoon pocketed his phone and turned his attention back to Gi-in. “Just checking the time, I think I might try to sleep sooner tonight.”

It wasn’t completely a lie. Every time Jihoon opened his phone his attention was either turned to the clock quickly ticking towards 11pm or the photo he took of himself and Sanghyeok earlier. It seemed like each time he looked at it he discovered something new that was worthy of notice, like the way Sanghyeok tilted his head towards Jihoon, or how the angle of the camera made that action look like Sanghyeok was resting his head against Jihoon’s shoulder.

“What do you think hyung?” Suhwan’s excited voice chimed in the background.

“Anything you want,” Siwoo agreed with an indulgent look at his bright eyed adc, “But if it doesn’t work in scrims we’re scrapping the idea.”

“Even off the clock you guys are talking about work huh?” Geonbu commented. He was laying on his bed and typing something on his phone. The slight smile on his face made it obvious who he was talking to.

For some reason the reminder of soulmates didn’t ache as much as it usually did. Instead it reminded Jihoon of the soft smile he saw in his dreams. Just having his soulmate be a tangible goal he was working towards gave Jihoon comfort, even if he hadn’t obtained it yet.

“Jihoon hyung?”

“Hm?” Jihoon turned to see Suhwan looking at him, “What’s up?”

“What are you thinking about?” Suhwan asked curiously.

“I think I had one of those dreams.” Jihoon admitted, “The special ones.”

A quick glance confirmed that Siwoo and Gi-in were absorbed in a conversation with each other and Geonbu was still on his phone. It wouldn’t hurt to get a fresh perspective on how to interpret the vague messages his dreams were sending him.

“Really?” Suhwan’s eyes widened, “Here? That doesn’t mean your soulmate is Chinese does it? Wait no, your words are in Korean right?”

“They’re in Korean,” Jihoon confirmed. He hadn’t even considered his location until Suhwan brought it up. What if his soulmate really did live in China?

“Hyung, do you know what that means then?”

Jihoon stared blankly at Suhwan’s excited expression, “I’m not sure?”

“It means your soulmate is a fan doesn’t it? Most Korean speakers you’ll come across in this area right now are here to watch MSI!” Suhwan reasoned, “So it’s possible it’s a fan or one of the staff.”

“That means it’s also possible it’s a Chinese fan that learned Korean but lives here.” Jihoon realized, “If they saw that their tattoo was in Korean they might’ve learned the language. But they would still live here and not in Korea.”

“But isn’t it more likely it’s someone from Korea that’s here for MSI?” Suhwan argued.

“It’s more likely, but I have to consider all the possibilities.” Jihoon sighed. Maybe the dreams weren’t a blessing at all. He never once considered that his soulmate could live in a different country. Just the possibility suddenly made the anxious feeling return.

“If they really are from China that doesn’t mean you’ll move to the LPL does it?” Suhwan said with a frown.

“That’s jumping the gun a bit.” Jihoon said, “I’ll think about it more after MSI. Or after summer. Or worlds. I don’t have time to think about unrelated things for a while. My focus has to be on competing. Soulmates can wait.”

“Oh.” Suhwan’s expression dimmed for a moment before he brightened again, “So I was discussing this team comp idea with Siwoo hyung….”

-

11:23pm.

Jihoon sped up as he saw the time on his phone. He was hoping he would get back in time to convince Sanghyeok to not sleep on the couch before he set up the blankets. Jihoon opened the door quietly and peered into the room. Instead of the greeting he expected, he saw Sanghyeok asleep on the couch.

He was still sitting upright, the book just barely slipping from out of his limp hand. Sanghyeok’s head lulled to the side and his glasses were crooked on his face. Jihoon smiled and felt the urge to take a photo, although he wasn’t sure how Sanghyeok would feel if he did.

Should he wake Sanghyeok up? It couldn’t be comfortable sleeping like that, but it also felt like something taboo to disturb someone sleeping so soundly. Jihoon walked over and

reached out to gently shake Sanghyeok's shoulder.

Sanghyeok made a small murmuring noise and turned to rest his head against Jihoon's hand. Jihoon felt a mix of nervous fluttering and warm adoration as he watched Sanghyeok nuzzle against his hand. Physical affection was rare to come by for most pro players , which probably explained the erratic yet not unpleasant way his heart was beating. Sanghyeok looked so small like this, curled into a ball and leaning into Jihoon's touch like an affectionate cat.

A sudden thought struck him. With how small Sanghyeok was, maybe it was possible for Jihoon to carry him to bed? It wasn't like Sanghyeok could just sleep on the couch like this anyway. Jihoon carefully set the book to the side and hooked one arm under Sanghyeok's legs. He curled his other arm behind Sanghyeok's back and felt his head fall against Jihoon's chest. Jihoon wondered briefly if Sanghyeok would be able to hear Jihoon's racing heartbeat.

It was easier than he expected to carry Sanghyeok across the room and onto the bed. If Jihoon spent a day or two at the gym every week he was sure he would be able to do it effortlessly next time. Sanghyeok stirred slightly as Jihoon set him down and clung to Jihoon's shirt.

"Mmm..hyung…..sleep." Sanghyeok muttered, tugging on Jihoon's shirt.

Jihoon froze. Who was Sanghyeok talking to?

He let himself be pulled downwards anyway, sliding into bed next to Sanghyeok. Sanghyeok tucked his head under Jihoon's chin and murmured something else Jihoon couldn't quite hear. Jihoon laid there stiffly as Sanghyeok continued to sleep contentedly against his chest. He was sure he heard Sanghyeok say "hyung", but who would that be referring to?

Oh. Jihoon felt a cold feeling wash over him. His soulmate. Of course. Who else could be older than Sanghyeok and familiar enough to join him in bed? That meant Jihoon should definitely leave now before Sanghyeok woke up. It would probably save them both from a lot of embarrassment. Yet….

It was so warm. The weight of another person on top of him, the feeling of soft hair brushing against his neck, the way Sanghyeok's fingers were still curled around his shirt…

Jihoon instinctively rested his chin on top of Sanghyeok's head and pulled him closer. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to stay like this a little longer. When was the last time he felt affection like this? He closed his eyes and recalled the way Sanghyeok tugged him downwards and tucked his head into the crook of Jihoon's neck. He couldn't even remember the last time he hugged someone outside of team huddles and winning celebrations, much less experienced affection as warm and intimate as this.

Just a while longer, he told himself. It wouldn't hurt to bask in this warmth for just a little longer.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Thanksgiving~

Been really busy lately but writing is always so comforting c:

(also thank god for the black friday deals I can't wait to get my Oner and Faker sweatshirts)

(AND the Choker content on my timeline is so asdsfuhjgkflsl when it rains it pours I guess I'm very not normal about it all but I will not question the blessings the universe bestows upon me)

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gentle piano music woke him from his sleep. Jihoon laid in bed and listened to the dreamy notes blend together into a sweet melody. It was a familiar song, but he couldn't quite remember where he'd heard it before. Opening his eyes, Jihoon propped himself up on his elbow and watched the person at the piano play. Elegant hands danced over ivory keys as the music continued to wash over Jihoon.

The music stopped.

"You're awake?"

"Keep playing." Jihoon heard himself say. His voice sounded affectionate and warm.

A laugh just as warm greeted his ears before those elegant hands found the keyboard again. Jihoon laid in bed and watched them play. He could spend every morning like this. The sound of each note was rich and luxurious, Jihoon didn't remember owning such an expensive instrument. What brand was it?

Jihoon sat up with a jolt when his quiet musings were disrupted by the realization that he couldn't seem to see the piano. He knew it was there and he knew the person was playing it, but he couldn't for his life discern a single detail about its appearance. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It was another prophetic dream. It had to be.

He continued to focus on his breathing until his heartbeat slowed. If he got too excited he would wake up again like last time. Jihoon opened his eyes and continued to watch the person play. If he could control whether his eyes were open or not, couldn't he control other things too? If he knew he was dreaming, wouldn't it be like a lucid dream?

"Hey." Jihoon called, his voice shaky. That person. If this was the kind of dream he thought it was, then that person was his soulmate. If he could talk to them now, could he get a hint for

who they were?

“Yes my love?”

Jihoon’s heart ached at the response. How long would it be until he could hear those words in person? He opened his mouth, voice still coming out shaky, “Can you come here?”

The person walked closer and Jihoon was disappointed to see that their face still wasn’t visible. They smiled and Jihoon felt comforted even though he couldn’t see it. “Are you alright?” The faceless person asked, “You look a little shaken. Did you have a bad dream?”

Gentle hands caressed his face and Jihoon let himself bask in the care and concern. “No.” Jihoon said, “It’s a good dream. A really good dream.”

“Yeah?”

Jihoon leaned into the cool touch of his soulmate's fingers, “Yeah. I was dreaming about you.”

“Me?” The person sounded amused, “What was the dream about?”

“Just you.” Jihoon said.

“And that was enough to make it a good dream?”

“Mhm.” Jihoon reached out and tugged on his soulmate’s arm, deciding to test his luck, “Lay with me?”

“Of course.”

Another warm body joined him in bed and Jihoon confirmed his previous suspicion that his soulmate was indeed smaller than him, although that hardly narrowed it down. Even for a man, Jihoon was decently tall. It probably wasn't difficult to find someone shorter than him. He needed more information.

"Can I ask you something odd?" Jihoon said hesitantly.

"Hm? Of course. What is it?"

"How tall are you?"

"— — —- — - - ———— - —-"

"What?" Jihoon sat up and realized he could no longer feel the warmth of another person next to him.

"—- - - —— — - —?"

"Wait-"

No matter how desperately Jihoon held onto the dream, it began to slip away from him. Every bit of dreamlike warmth drained away until he was suddenly enveloped in a different type of warmth. A warmth that was rough and real, yet still comforting. Jihoon opened his eyes and the memories of last night came flooding back to him.

Sanghyeok was still lying on his chest.

He cursed silently. How could he have fallen asleep? Jihoon barely had enough time to admonish himself internally when the warm body on top of him began to stir.

“M’hyung?” A sleepy voice murmured.

Jihoon cringed and steeled his nerves to answer, “Uh, actually hyung, it’s me.”

“Hyeonjun?” Sanghyeok murmured, still sounding half asleep.

Jihoon blinked. Hyeonjun? Why would Sanghyeok think he was Hyeonjun?

Sanghyeok’s hand pressed against Jihoon’s chest as he pushed himself to a half sitting position, “Hyeonjunie?”

Too confused to even feel embarrassed now, Jihoon spoke again, “Hyung it’s me. You fell asleep on me and I didn’t know how to get up without disturbing you.”

“Jihoon?” Sanghyeok’s voice sounded painfully awake now, Jihoon could almost see the dismayed expression even through the darkness, “I- how did I get here? I’m so sorry about….this. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, I thought you were- didn’t I fall asleep on the couch?”

“I carried you here.” Jihoon explained.

“Oh.” Sanghyeok sounded calmer now but still embarrassed, “I’m sorry again about….you know. Usually it’s Minhyung or Hyeonjun that carry me to bed if I fall asleep reading so I just…I must’ve…..sorry.”

He trailed off awkwardly and Jihoon felt a fluttering feeling when the pieces fell into place. Sanghyeok thought it was Minhyung or Hyeonjun. Minhyung. He was saying Minhyung’s name last night. It was just Minhyung, no one else. For some reason that sounded a lot less mortifying than Sanghyeok cuddling him because he mistakened Jihoon for his soulmate.

The bed shifted and Jihoon instinctively reached out to grab Sanghyeok's arm, "Where are you going?" He asked, bewildered.

"I was going to move to the couch." Sanghyeok said like it was obvious.

"Why? It's your bed."

"Jihoon-ah, I told you before that the couch will hurt your back." Sanghyeok's voice was fond even as he rebuked Jihoon.

"Who said anything about the couch?" Jihoon blurted.

The silence seemed to last an eternity and Jihoon wasn't sure if he was grateful for the darkness or not. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable." Sanghyeok said finally.

"You won't." Jihoon said immediately, "Unless it makes you uncomfortable…?"

"Of course not." Sanghyeok laughed, "If you couldn't tell by our…unfortunate position… when I woke up, I'm quite used to sharing a bed with others."

"Lay down then." Jihoon insisted.

The mattress dipped again as Sanghyeok sat back down. Jihoon released his grip on Sanghyeok's wrist and settled back down onto the mattress. He wasn't sure why he felt a twinge of disappointment when Sanghyeok didn't lay down on top of him like before. Maybe he really was just that touch starved.

"Do you share beds with your teammates a lot?" Jihoon wondered aloud.

“Not often,” Sanghyeok said, “Usually only when one of them leaves to visit family. They get lonely and sleep in my room sometimes. Or when their sleep schedules don’t match up they’ll come stay with me if they don’t want to sleep alone. I think they’ve all gotten too used to having company. They can never fall asleep if they’re alone.”

“That sounds nice.” Jihoon said wistfully. Just the memory of how that closeness felt made him feel bittersweet. He vaguely remembered how affectionate Minseok used to be, sitting on his lap or holding his hand without an ounce of hesitation. Jihoon sometimes wished he had the confidence to seek out human touch that boldly. Maybe he could just get a cat. Seeking affection from a cat seemed a lot easier and less daunting than seeking human touch.

“Does it?” Sanghyeok sounded surprised, “You always seemed like the type to enjoy your personal space.”

“Usually yes,” Jihoon admitted, “But with people I’m closer with I don’t mind. And not all of them. I guess I’m just a little picky.”

“I apologize again about earlier then.” Sanghyeok sounded embarrassed now, “I really didn’t mean to.”

“No it’s fine. You’re- you can-“ Jihoon bit his lip and thought about the best way to put his thoughts into words, “I was okay with it. You’re not….one of the people I would be uncomfortable with for, uh, that kinda stuff.”

“I’m glad then.” Sanghyeok said, “But for future reference, if it ever happens again you don’t need to worry about disturbing me. You can just get up.”

Again? If it happens again? Did Sanghyeok anticipate a situation where something like that would ever happen again?

Mind too caught up dissecting Sanghyeok’s words, Jihoon didn’t have time to filter his own words before they slipped from his mouth.

”I didn't want to get up.” Jihoon said before his brain could catch up. The seconds that followed seemed to drag on forever before Sanghyeok spoke again.

“You don’t have to worry about being polite.” Sanghyeok said with a small laugh, “Even if you wake me up it isn’t like I would be upset. Don’t worry.”

“I guess.” Jihoon muttered. Now that the moment of terror passed, he wasn’t even sure if he was relieved or disappointed that Sanghyeok misinterpreted his words. He should be relieved, he really should, yet part of him wished Sanghyeok realized the real reason Jihoon didn’t want to get up. If he understood, would he be less cautious with the distance between them? Would he touch Jihoon’s arm casually as he walked by? Would he use Jihoon’s lap as a leg rest while he read his books?

They lapsed into a silence that was anything but comfortable. It was quiet enough that Jihoon could hear the soft, even breaths as Sanghyeok drifted off to sleep. The sound of his breathing soothed the irritation nagging at Jihoon and he found himself hanging onto every breath. In the dead silence, even the rustling of blankets as Sanghyeok shifted sounded loud. The pristine silence didn’t get a chance to return before the rustling of blankets disrupted it again. Jihoon could feel the mattress shift in response to every movement Sanghyeok made. The movements happened far too often for Sanghyeok to be asleep.

“Hyung?” Jihoon called tentatively.

“Hm?” Sanghyeok’s voice sounded softer than usual but not at all drowsy, “Are you alright?”

“I don’t know.” Jihoon said. He still wasn’t even sure why he called out for Sanghyeok at all. “I just feel restless.”

“Do you know why?” Sanghyeok asked, voice still infused with that softness that made Jihoon feel like he could tell him anything.

“I’m not sure. I feel like I’m missing something. Or forgetting something. Or should be doing something.” Jihoon frowned as he tried to explain the itching feeling under his skin, “I just feel like there’s something not quite right.”

“Could it be sleeping in a new place?” Sanghyeok suggested, “A different bed. A different temperature…”

“Maybe?” It didn’t sound quite right, but Jihoon didn’t know what else it could be. He felt like he was forgetting something. Something important.

“Did you sleep alright yesterday?”

Jihoon barely remembered falling asleep yesterday, which probably meant it was fairly easy. “I think I slept okay.”

To Jihoon’s surprise, Sanghyeok made a sound suspiciously similar to muffled laughter. He sounded amused when he spoke again, “Jihoon-ah, if you slept in this exact room in this exact bed yesterday and you were okay, what do you think could be the problem? What’s different from yesterday to today?”

“The fact that I came back from 8 hours of practice to see my room flooded.” Jihoon said immediately before Sanghyeok could spout some nonsense about Jihoon being uncomfortable sharing and how he should move back to the couch.

“Oh.” The amusement dropped out of Sanghyeok’s voice, “That does sound like a lot to deal with when it all piles up. We all have enough to worry about especially during competition season. I could help you look for available hotels if you’d like? I’m sorry, I should’ve offered to help earlier.”

Jihoon flinched, now feeling guilty about making Sanghyeok feel bad for him when the flooded room really wasn’t anything more than a minor annoyance. In fact, the way it led to an opportunity to spend more time with Sanghyeok made it a blessing more than anything. “You don’t have to do that,” Jihoon said, “Spending more time with you is the only good part of this whole situation.”

“I-I’m glad, I think- I mean, I understand that.” Sanghyeok stumbled over his words slightly, “I apologize if this sounds odd, but we’ve known each other for so long that even if we don’t get many chances to speak outside of work I instinctively feel comfortable with you. Even without speaking, it feels like we’ve been close friends for years. Because of that feeling….I guess, in a sense, I missed you even if you were right beside me.”

Jihoon smiled at Sanghyeok through the darkness, a burst a warmth blooming in his chest as he stored Sanghyeok’s words deep in his heart, “I don’t think that’s odd. I feel the same way. It feels like somehow even without spending much time together I still got to know you anyway. There’s this sort of……affection? A connection? I don’t know how to explain it.”

Sanghyeok laughed and Jihoon noted that his voice sounded deeper when he laughed. Deep enough that it felt like it was resonating throughout Jihoon’s very being.

“So you don’t count playing against each other as spending time together?” Sanghyeok asked playfully, “Take away the stage and it’s not so different from friends playing games together.”

“Well if we’re counting in game minutes then I guess we’ve spent more time together than I thought.” Jihoon said, matching Sanghyeok’s playful tone, “In that case it makes sense why I feel so at ease around you. We’ve been gaming buddies for years now.”

“You can learn a lot about someone from how they play and how they respond to how other people play,” Sanghyeok mused, “In a way laning against you is like having a conversation.”

“Yeah? What am I saying in those conversations?” Jihoon asked.

“You challenge me.” Sanghyeok said, sounding thoughtful, “You’re also surprised at times. Usually you recover from being taken off guard very quickly, but when you don’t I always feel a little satisfied. It feels like an accomplishment for me to challenge you in return.”

Jihoon laughed, “Well, you do quite a few, uh, unorthodox things. When I play against you it just feels like you’re endlessly bluffing and I never know when you’re running to your death and when you’re going to produce a miracle.”

“I’d say there’s a 50/50 chance,” Sanghyeok sounded amused.

“More than that.” Jihoon disagreed, “There’s a reason you’ve won four times. You just see things other people don’t.”

“Sometimes that’s because there isn’t anything there at all,” Sanghyeok laughed, “I think I just got lucky. No matter how many times I make a bad call, my teammates are ready to follow without hesitation the next time. People with that sort of unshakable trust are difficult to find. They have faith in me regardless of past results.”

“You think the world of them.” Jihoon said. Just a statement. An observation.

“Yes.” Sanghyeok’s voice took on the lilt it always did when he smiled, “Those four are special. Unique. I always think about how lucky I am, and how unfortunate I am. It is only by chance they got caught in my orbit, and all I can do is selfishly hope that they stay. Isn’t that awful? For me to wish that?” Sanghyeok’s voice was melancholy now, “Jihoon-ah, do you know how an object breaks out of orbit?”

“No,” Jihoon admitted. Something about the somber and sardonic edge to Sanghyeok’s voice put him on edge. He wished he could do something to make it go away. To smooth out the edges.

“If an object moves fast enough, it can overcome the gravitational pull of its planet and fly away.” Sanghyeok continued, voice smooth as honey and cold as ice, “The faster they go– the more they achieve, the more likely they are to break free. The planet that was once their home and anchor becomes a restraint they need to overcome. They all burn so brightly, how long will it be until my pull is no longer enough to keep them by my side? When that day comes, will I be happy?”

“I….” Jihoon bit the inside of his lip. He didn’t know what to say. The melancholic musings fell like withered flowers into Jihoon’s lap; Drained of color yet still fragrant nonetheless. With nothing else to say, Jihoon decided to just say the truth, “It makes me happy that you told me something like this.” he said sincerely, “I don’t know what else to say but that I’m

happy to listen. The way you voice your thoughts feels like I'm listening to poetry or something like that. Even if it hurts a little I want to keep listening anyway."

"I'm sorry, it wasn't my intention to make you feel bad." Sanghyeok apologized.

Jihoon couldn't help but smile, "Hyung, why is it that you didn't hear anything else I said? I said I feel lucky that you were comfortable sharing your thoughts."

"You also said it gave you a feeling of sadness." Sanghyeok reminded.

"I said it made me feel sad the way poetry would, that's a compliment." Jihoon defended.

"Not all poetry is sad." Sanghyeok disagreed.

"I don't read much poetry," Jihoon conceded, "My point is that I'm glad you were comfortable talking, and I hope you still will be even if I'm not very good at saying things in return."

Sanghyeok made a soft humming noise, "I think I'm the one that should be grateful you listened. When it comes to things like this, sometimes it feels like I have nobody to confide in. Somehow I felt like I could tell you though."

Jihoon frowned, "Yeah, I guess you can't really talk to your teammates about it."

"Perhaps I've mixed my personal and professional lives too much," Sanghyeok said wryly, "Everyone close to me is too close to the situation. If I told them, they would only feel trapped or guilty."

"What about your soulmate?" Jihoon blurted.

“Soulmate?” Sanghyeok sounded taken aback.

“Um, I meant,” Jihoon cringed, “You know, you can talk to them about it right?”

“Oh.” Sanghyeok still sounded confused, “I haven’t found them yet.”

“Sorry.” Jihoon felt a confusing mixture of mortification and excitement, “I don’t know why I said that. I just saw so many articles….so I assumed, you know, but then you talked like you didn’t have one and I just wasn’t sure-”

“It’s alright Jihoon,” Sanghyeok said, the amused tone of his voice reassuring Jihoon that he wasn’t upset, “I get that question quite often. It isn’t really a sore spot for me, I’m rather happy where I am. Or I suppose I’m too busy to be upset about it. I don’t always know which one it is.”

“I’m still sorry for making assumptions.” Jihoon muttered, “I guess I saw so many gossip articles that I started thinking they were true.”

“Yeah? What do they say?” Sanghyeok asked with genuine curiosity.

Jihoon cringed again at his own lack of filter, “You know, a lot of stuff about that idea that people with special soulmarks are destined to be special and all that. How someone like you must’ve had one that was especially unique. Plus all the speculating about who your soulmate is since you’ve most likely met them because you’re almost 30 and most people meet their soulmate before then and if you had a unique soulmark then you’d know if you met them and I think I’ll stop talking now. Sorry.”

To Jihoon’s surprise and relief Sanghyeok just laughed. The slight rocking of the bed as Sanghyeok shook with laughter had a calming effect on Jihoon’s mortification. As long as Sanghyeok wasn’t offended or mad then Jihoon could handle looking a little bit like a fool. “You know more about the topic than I thought you would,” Sanghyeok commented, voice light with amusement.

“I’m not purposefully looking for gossip about you,” Jihoon said with a wince, “It just shows up.”

“I believe you,” Sanghyeok assured him, “Like I said, it isn’t really a sore spot for me. Whoever it is, I feel like I’ve met them already, even if I don’t know who they are.”

“And…you’re okay with that?” Jihoon asked hesitantly.

“I am.” Sanghyeok responded, sounding fully sincere, “Although part of me fears that I won’t be in the future. The same way children turn up their nose at the idea of marriage and young adults blanch at the thought of raising children. Sometimes their preferences change, sometimes they don’t. ”

“I see.” Jihoon sighed. It must be nice. Most of the time Jihoon was also too busy to think about it. But, during those brief moments where his mind had the luxury to wander, he found that it was all he could think about. Maybe it was because he always felt the need to be working towards something. When he competed he had something to set his focus on. When he wasn’t, the thing his brain fixated on was his soulmate. After all, what better way to improve oneself than to find that person who offered unconditional love and companionship as they grew alongside him? If his soulmate was truly someone made for him, they would definitely be someone that challenged him and made him a better person. Of course that would be the goal his brain defaulted to. If only he had been a gym person instead, then maybe his off season would be filled with protein shakes and muscle soreness instead of lovesick yearning.

“Maybe I should start going to the gym.” Jihoon said out loud.

“Oh? What brought that on?” Sanghyeok sounded surprised.

Jihoon winced. He didn’t mean to say that out loud. Maybe he was more tired than he thought. “Just a random thought.” Jihoon lied. It would be a bit too tedious and embarrassing explaining how his train of thought led to that.

“It would suit you.” Sanghyeok commented.

Jihoon swore he felt his heart skip a beat. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, I just meant-” Sanghyeok sounded embarrassed as he floundered for words, “Since you’re tall and- well, just- just that. But I suppose that’s just a generalization since people of all heights can look good with musculature. Not that it’s about the appearance. Exercise should be for health after all. Which is even more reason why height doesn’t matter. Shouldn’t matter. I just mean. Exercise. Exercise is good. Healthy. Good for health.”

It was Jihoon’s turn to laugh this time. Hearing Sanghyeok ramble nervously like that was so hopelessly endearing. He wondered if Sanghyeok felt the same when Jihoon was rambling earlier.

“Anyways.” Sanghyeok cleared his throat, “Speaking of health. You should sleep.”

Jihoon smiled, “Are you saying that because you’re tired or because you think you think I’m tired?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course.” Jihoon said, “If you’re tired then we’ll sleep. If you’re just saying it for my sake then I think I’d rather talk to you more.”

“You should still sleep for your own sake.” Sanghyeok scolded gently.

“So you’re saying it was for my sake and not yours.” Jihoon surmised.

Sanghyeok sighed but Jihoon could hear the fondness when he spoke again, “I’m *saying* it shouldn’t matter whether I’m tired or not when it comes to your own sleep.”

“The only reasons I would try to sleep right now are if you were tired or if you didn’t want to talk anymore.”

“Of course I want to talk to you.” Sanghyeok said immediately, “I’m telling you to sleep out of concern, not because I want to get rid of you.”

Jihoon felt a lightness in his chest in response to Sanghyeok’s words. Assuming Sanghyeok wanted to talk to him was one thing, but hearing him say it out loud was something else entirely. Jihoon was glad the lights were off so Sanghyeok wouldn’t see him grinning ear to ear.

“What would you like to talk about then?” Sanghyeok conceded.

“Anything you’d like.” Jihoon said immediately, “I like listening to you talk.”

“Ask me something then,” Sanghyeok prompted.

“Hmmm,” Jihoon bit his lip. What did he want to know about Sanghyeok?

“Would you ever get a cat?” Jihoon asked, not fully sure why that was the question that popped into his head.

Sanghyeok laughed, a sound that Jihoon was quickly becoming addicted to. Or maybe it was the feeling that laugh gave him. The spark of elation in his chest that he was able to make someone else laugh. It had nothing to do with the fact that it was Sanghyeok specifically.

“I think I already have enough living things to take care of at home,” Sanghyeok said, sounding amused, “Although they aren’t that dissimilar to cats.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Hyeonjun and Minseokie are the embodiment of the classic cat archetype. A little bit moody. Demanding when it comes to attention and affection but not very straightforward about it. Independent most of the time and will ask for attention by sitting near you and pretending that they just happened to be in the same room.” Sanghyeok’s voice was filled with fondness as he spoke.

“I can see it.” Jihoon considered, “And the others?”

“Well, I suppose Minhyung would be like a maine coon.” Sanghyeok mused, “Although that’s a bit of a loophole since maine coons are often described as dog-like in their behavior. He definitely still has the independence of a cat even if his loyalty and affection is dog-like. Wooje would be the type of cat that’s shy at first and then warms up to become affectionate. Once he becomes comfortable then he’ll finally show the demanding and clingy side. The kind of cat that won’t even sleep unless their person goes to bed with them.”

“What about you?” Jihoon asked.

“Me?” Sanghyeok sounded surprised, “Well, I suppose I would be the kind of cat that’s very independent. Minhyung always says I’m like one of those unbothered cats because I let him hug me but I don’t hug him back. I guess my answer would be the tolerant and unbothered type of cat.”

“Is that why you let all of them sleep in your bed when they’re lonely? The tolerance?” Jihoon said teasingly. It was so endearing that Sanghyeok answered the bizarre question so earnestly. How was it that everything Sanghyeok did was endearing?

“Maybe. Although I think I’ve actually taken a liking to the affection now.” Sanghyeok admitted. “It’s comforting.”

“I can imagine.” Jihoon pulled the blankets tighter around him and recalled the feeling of a warm body pressed against his. There was just something so incredibly comforting about feeling the weight of another being. No wonder people liked weighted blankets. Maybe Jihoon should get one of those. It was more realistic than getting a cat at this point in time.

“Are you cold?”

Jihoon broke out of his thoughts, “What?”

“I felt a tug on the blankets,” Sanghyeok explained, “Do you not have enough on your side? I can turn up the heating if you’d like. Or we can each have a blanket instead of layering the two of them if you’d prefer it that way.”

“No, no,” Jihoon said hurriedly, “It’s okay. I’m not cold at all. I have enough blanket too.”

“Are you sure?” Sanghyeok sounded unconvinced, “I can turn the heating higher. Or I can move closer so it’s easier to share the blankets.”

“No it’s-” Jihoon paused. Actually, that second option didn’t sound bad. “Yeah, that one works. You can, uh, move closer. If that helps.”

The mattress shifted as Sanghyeok moved closer to Jihoon. Part of him was tempted to reach out to see just how close Sanghyeok was.

“Is this okay?” Sanghyeok asked. His voice barely sounded any closer.

“A little more.” Jihoon said, even though he was sure Sanghyeok would be able to hear his heartbeat if he moved any closer. Why was he so nervous anyway?

“Is this better?” Sanghyeok’s voice was so close that it sent shivers down Jihoon’s spine.

“Yeah.” Jihoon barely kept his voice from cracking as he spoke. It was an odd feeling to share a space so intimately with another person. This sort of closeness was something he would get a glimpse of in barely coherent memories of his childhood. It was something so

viscerally familiar yet so completely foreign. Maybe, at their core, people still craved this sort of closeness even after they no longer needed to be held and rocked to sleep.

“Are you still feeling restless? Or do you think you’ll be able to fall asleep now?” Sanghyeok asked.

“I feel better now.” Jihoon murmured. Quite peaceful now actually. Even with the distance between them Jihoon could feel Sanghyeok’s body heat warming the space they shared. He closed his eyes and let the tranquil feeling wash over him. “I’m sorry if I kept you up.”

“Not at all.” Sanghyeok’s voice was soft, “I enjoyed talking to you. On a day when we didn’t have responsibilities the next morning, I would’ve been glad to talk the entire night.”

“Really?” Jihoon’s words slurred slightly as he spoke. Maybe he was more tired than he thought. “I’ll hold you to that hyung. You can’t take it back. I’ve got great memory.”

“I know. Goodnight Jihoon.”

“G’night hyung.” Jihoon muttered. “T’morrow. Be here tomorrow.”

“I will. I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for all the kind comments. They make my heart happy.

(also feel free to leave suggestions for winter/holiday/christmas themed ideas! Can be choker, guke, oz, or just anything zofgk related, shipping and non-shipping)

((50% chance I don't finish the holiday collection I'm planning, 90% chance I'll post whatever I have completed anyways))

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gentle piano music played, accompanied by the soft pitter patter of rain. Jihoon's body moved instinctively to the music, his feet stepping rhythmically in a simple square pattern. Another body moved alongside his own. The feeling of their interlocked hands filled Jihoon with warmth. They were dancing.

On a whim, Jihoon spun them in a circle and wrapped them in his arms. The person let out a surprised laugh but let Jihoon take the lead anyway. They swayed from side to side, Jihoon's chest pressing against his partner's back. Their arms were a tangled mess, but neither of them seemed like they wanted to let go for long enough to sort it out.

Jihoon buried his face against the back of his partner's neck. This closeness. This warmth. He never wanted to let go. The song changed to something lighter and more whimsical. Despite the fact that their languid movements no longer suited the new melody, Jihoon was still reluctant to let go.

"Shall we do a different dance?" A playful voice said.

"But I like this." Jihoon replied.

"A proper dance." They responded in a chiding tone.

"I don't really know how to dance." Jihoon admitted.

"I'll show you. Here." The person pried themselves from Jihoon's grip and stood in front of him once again. They took Jihoon's hands and placed them against their waist, "Now, start with the left foot."

“Left?”

“Mhm.” Hands came up to rest on Jihoon’s shoulders, “You move first and I’ll follow.”

“But I don’t know how to do this.” Jihoon said with a wince.

“I can lead then?” They asked with a playful tone, “Although I think you’d be too stubborn to be the one following.”

“I don’t mind following if it’s you I’m following.” Jihoon said, his voice sounding so sappy it was almost unfamiliar to his own ears.

His partner hid their face against Jihoon’s chest, “How do you always catch me off guard?” They muttered.

Jihoon laughed, “Because it’s you. And because it’s me. Because it’s us.”

A warm smile.

“- —. -.------... – – —-”

Jihoon pulled back, “What?”

“---.-...-----.-.-.-.------- - – - - —..- - - - —-?”

A jarring rush of cold swept away all the warmth and Jihoon sat up with a jolt. His heart was racing and his breathing heavy. Where was he? What was happening? His hands felt clammy. He shivered.

“Jihoon?”

Jihoon jerked his head around and took far too long to recognize the person standing in front of him as Sanghyeok. “Hyung?” Jihoon said, still disoriented.

Sanghyeok frowned, “Are you alright? You look a bit shaken. Did you have a bad dream?”

Dream?

Jihoon’s eyes widened as small bits and pieces came rushing back to him alongside the events of last night. Right. He was in Sanghyeok’s room again. That’s where he was. And the dream……

“Jihoon?” Sanghyeok called again, sounding concerned, “Are you alright?”

“Yeah.” Jihoon said quickly, “I’m fine. Just trying to remember something. Don’t worry about me.”

“Okay…” Sanghyeok glanced hesitantly at the door, “I’m going to head out then alright? You still have the keycard don’t you? You can come back to this room if they still haven’t sorted your situation out.”

“Okay hyung.” Jihoon said, still distracted. He barely registered Sanghyeok leaving as he concentrated on recalling the foggy memories from last night. There was music. And rain. Music. Rain. Music. They were smiling. Music. There was music. Rain. Music. Rain.

Jihoon sighed and flopped back onto the bed. It was like sand through his fingers. No matter how hard he tried to recall anything substantial it didn’t work. He met his soulmate again yesterday, that was the only useful piece of information he had. Maybe it was at the

restaurant again? Or they walked past each other in the rain? It was all too vague. He needed to remember more.

A glance at the time told him he probably had to get going as well. Jihoon sat up with a sigh and caught sight of a packaged bread on the table. Next to it was a napkin with the word "eat" scrawled hastily on it. Jihoon felt a stab of guilt. He was so caught up in his thoughts that he dismissed Sanghyeok rudely even after he went out of his way to give Jihoon a place to stay and even get him something to eat. The fragrant smell of green onion and garlic wafted off the still warm piece of bread. Jihoon shoved it into his pocket and rushed out the door.

As Jihoon waited for the elevator he typed out a quick "thanks for the bread" text to Sanghyeok. Before he could even put his phone away it pinged again.

"Was it good?"

Jihoon dutifully took a bite of the bread before texting back: "Delicious, thank you hyung~"

The response was instant again: *"I'm glad, should I buy you more?"*

Jihoon couldn't keep the giddy smile off his face as he read Sanghyeok's message. He tapped the screen idly as he thought about what he should say back. It would make his day to have Sanghyeok buy him bread again. However, would it make Sanghyeok's day if Jihoon spontaneously bought him something instead? Jihoon glanced back to see the new umbrella tucked into the pocket of his backpack. So far Sanghyeok already paid for dinner, bought him an umbrella, *and* got up early to buy bread for him. Jihoon was sorely lacking in the reciprocation department so far. He needed to step it up.

The elevator dinged as it arrived in the lobby. Jihoon was still staring at his phone as he walked out. Should he invite Sanghyeok to dinner? This time he could make sure to have a reservation and hand his card to the waiter early. No, Sanghyeok would probably be eating with his team most of the time. Unless they paired off to go on dates? No, they wouldn't ditch him like that. Maybe Sanghyeok would voluntarily leave to give them space for a romantic outing though…..

Too many variables to tell. Jihoon settled for a “If you buy me bread, can I pay for dinner next time?” That way Jihoon expressed his desire to have dinner together while leaving it up to Sanghyeok to suggest a time. Perfect.

Ding.

Jihoon had his phone out in record time.

“No.”

“:)”

Remembering that he was in public now, Jihoon smothered the giddy smile threatening to show itself on his face. Jihoon loitered to the side where he wouldn’t obstruct the traffic in the lobby and typed out “When do I get to treat you to a meal then?”

“When you’re older than me.” Sanghyeok sent back immediately.

“That’s not fair hyung” Jihoon typed, hoping his sulkiness showed through the text. There was no response this time. Jihoon felt a twinge of disappointment as he put his phone away. Sanghyeok was probably busy now. That made sense. They weren’t here on vacation after all.

Now that his attention was no longer on his phone, the lively piano music playing in the lobby nagged at his eardrums. That distinct feeling that he was missing something returned. Jihoon tried to shake it off; This was no time to be distracted. He grit his teeth and headed towards the door, they were supposed to meet in front of the hotel so they could all go to practice together.

Music.

Jihoon froze when the man playing the piano caught his eye. His eyes zeroed in on the person's hands and suddenly they looked paler, thinner, more graceful. Jihoon's head throbbed painfully as the different images flickered in front of his eyes. There was someone playing the piano. Someone that wasn't this person in front of him right now. Where did he see that person? Why was this person important?

The song changed into a softer melody and suddenly Jihoon remembered. Pale, graceful hands dancing over piano keys. Those same hands caressing Jihoon's face gently before the person joined him in bed. His soulmate. It was them. Another dream. Another clue. But what did it mean?

Jihoon shuffled through the different possibilities: They played piano. They liked that particular song. They like music in general. They were a musician. They were into classical music. Was it the piano? Or the song?

The song….

"Hey!" Jihoon called before his aversion to speaking to strangers could stop him, "Were you here yesterday?"

The man at the piano paused and gave Jihoon a startled look, "Yes? Why?"

"Do you play the same songs every day?" Jihoon asked.

"Yeah, basically." The man still looked confused, "It's the same set list I cycle through."

Jihoon could feel his heart beating out of his chest and he gave the man a quick bow, "Thank you, sorry for the bother."

He turned around quickly and rushed out the door. That had to be it. That had to be. It made sense with the other clues. The restaurant. The rain. The song. His soulmate must be staying at this exact same hotel. That had to be what all the clues meant. No wonder Jihoon was

running into them every day. Jihoon smiled to himself as he piled into the car with his teammates. With this many dreams, he was bound to get enough clues to identify them. Jihoon leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, drawing up a mental image of his person.

Shorter than him at a height that was tall for a girl but average for a man. Soft smile and pink lips; Pink enough to be makeup but not enough for it to be heavy makeup. That also meant the rest of the face was likely to have the same subtle application of makeup. Based on the newly acquired knowledge of their hands, Jihoon could assume they were pale and fairly thin. Their fingernails were neatly trimmed, which made sense if they were a pianist. At the very least, that already eliminated anyone with long or colored nails. If these small clues kept accumulating, he would find his soulmate in no time.

“Jihoon!”

“Huh?” Jihoon snapped out of his pondering and looked around to see who was calling him.

“What’s wrong with you? I’ve called your name five times!” His manager scolded, “Pay attention. I just received a notification that your hotel room was refunded? Did something happen? Look at this email! They’re apologizing for the inconvenience as if your room flooded or something!”

“Oh, uh, about that.” Jihoon resisted the urge to shy away from his manager’s glare, “My room did flood actually. But it’s no big deal. I sent all my stuff to get cleaned, nothing was damaged.”

His manager looked skeptical, “Where did you sleep?”

Jihoon froze. He couldn’t say he stayed with Sanghyeok. That would just cause unnecessary issues. Plus, if he told them then they would probably force him to move. He didn’t want to leave Sanghyeok just yet. “It wasn’t like the bed was wet.” Jihoon muttered, “Plus they said they would have someone come in and fix the pipes today. It’s not that bad really. Just a wet carpet.”

His manager’s eyebrows shot up, “You slept in the flooded room?”

“Yes?” Jihoon said as convincingly as he could.

“You should have told me,” His manager sighed, “Alright, I’ll get another room booked for you.”

“No, it’s fine.” Jihoon said quickly, “They told me there were no other rooms available last time I checked with them. My room is fine. It isn’t like I spend much time there anyway. The wet carpet will dry from the heating at some point. And the pipes should be fixed already-”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’re not sleeping in a flooded room. I’m sure there’s another hotel with openings.”

Jihoon’s heart sunk. Another hotel? Right after finding out his soulmate was likely staying at the one he was at?

“Isn’t it better if I stay at the same place as the others?” Jihoon argued weakly.

The manager gave him a stern look, “Jihoon. You realize how important this competition is right? We can’t afford to have any distractions. Even something as trivial as a wet carpet could be a disruption. You need to be in optimal condition to perform well. That includes having a good living space.”

“Right.” Jihoon looked down. The blunt reminder stung. What was he doing? He wasn’t here to chase after a faceless person just because the universe decided something was special about them. He wasn’t here for love or to find a relationship. He was here to compete. To pursue his dream. That was the most important thing. The only important thing. Everything else was just a distraction.

He cast every warm smile and warm feeling into the back of his mind and took a deep breath. Just like that, his brain switched easily and painlessly into competition mode. Nothing existed in his mind but numbers and strategy. Thoughts of the game overwhelmed his every waking moment as day after day passed him by. It was like how it always was when he focused; He

was single-minded to the point where he couldn't remember what he ate that morning even if he tried. Nothing could catch his attention. Not the scenery in Chengdu, not the new flavors and foods, not the faceless person still waiting for him in his dreams.

Yet, something was different this time. His years of practice allowed him to close off his heart and let his brain take custody of his body as he always did. Outwardly it was as if everything was the same as always: His emotions cut off so that he could focus without unnecessary interference. But this time, the part of him he severed from his consciousness didn't lay peacefully dormant.

Within the depths of his closed off heart, even if Jihoon couldn't feel it yet, there was something alive and bleeding. Loneliness and yearning festered within him like never before. The glimmer of hope Jihoon had unconsciously clung onto made the previously intangible doubts and yearnings become something real. By even daring to hope, he gave life to hypotheticals and musings. This life, it was something he could no longer lock away cleanly and inconsequentially on a whim. The dreams. The closeness. The warmth. It clawed at the wound in Jihoon's heart in an irreversible way. It stained his soul and clung to the threads of his very being.

Fate was in motion. This time, there was no stopping it.

Chapter End Notes

Dropping this here before I get too busy to write during holiday season! This will most likely be the last update of the year, but I'll drop a few festive short stories later on as a christmas gift c:

Hope everyone has a good holiday!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“GEN G WILL BE YOUR MSI 2024 CHAMPIONS!”

The arena roared to life, louder than before. The sound of the cheering hit Jihoon like a wave as he took off his headset. It all seemed so unreal. It was all a blur. He did it. His head spun with a whirlwind of emotions as he stumbled through the motions. His vision blurred and tears welled up in his eyes. Through his tear filled vision, the stage lights above him looked like stars. How could he describe the feeling? It felt as if he spent the past month running and finally was allowed to stop. The exhaustion and exhilaration too dominant over his senses for him to truly process that he was allowed to rest now.

Excited hands pulled at him and suddenly he found himself in front of the trophy. It glistened under the stage lights, surfaces unmarred by human touch. They would be the ones to leave their fingerprints. With another cheer, they lifted the trophy. It was so beautiful. And then, all of a sudden, there it was– The relief. All at once it started to feel real. A breathless laugh escaped his throat as the relief melted all the tension in his body.

“Hello, it’s nice to meet you.”

Jihoon pulled back from the trophy with a gasp. He felt as if he had been doused in cold water. Gripping his arm, he braced himself for the wave of insecurity and doubt that always pierced through him, but it didn’t come. Instead, there was a twinge of guilt in his chest. Small at first, but rapidly spreading until his entire body seemed to ache. This time, his tattoo didn’t feel like a taunt from the universe. A reminder that he wasn’t special. A slap in the face that told him he could never have it all. This time, the sight of the tattoo felt like his soulmate talking to him. Weakly and timidly, they were reminding Jihoon that they were still there. He could almost hear the soft voice in his head asking Jihoon not to forget about them.

“I need to go back to the hotel.” Jihoon blurted, drawing surprised look from his teammates.

“Why?” Gi-in looked confused, “We should go out and celebrate first shouldn’t we?”

“We can celebrate once we’re back in Korea,” Jihoon suggested, trying his best to mask his urgency, “Since we know the restaurants better. Sorry. Something came up and I really should go as soon as possible.”

“Okay, sure.” Gi-in still looked confused, “Let us know if you need anything.”

“Celebrating in Korea is a good idea,” Suhwan agreed, “It’s a lot more comfortable back home.”

“If we’re not celebrating tonight then I’ll be heading out first too,” Geonbu mumbled, “See you guys back in Korea?”

“Off to see your boyfriend?” Siwoo teased.

Geonbu huffed, “And?”

Siwoo laughed at Geonbu’s half grumpy half embarrassed expression, “And nothing. I hope you two have a good time. It’s really sweet that he came to see you compete. Go see the pandas together too! And go on one of those boat rides. It’s very romantic.”

“Thanks.” Geonbu smiled and waved before turning to leave.

Geonbu also deciding to leave made Jihoon feel less guilty about ditching so soon, but he would have all the time in the world to celebrate later. This matter was more urgent. Jihoon nudged Siwoo. “Hey, why don’t you two also go out on a date or something,” Jihoon suggested, “I can take Suhwan and head back to the hotel.”

“Really?” Siwoo’s eyes lit up, “You’re sure?”

“Of course. I’ll feel less bad about ditching if everyone has plans to do other things anyway.” Jihoon said honestly.

“Thanks Jihoonie, you’re the best.” Siwoo said with a grin, “A romantic getaway in Chengdu before we reconvene in Korea to celebrate. Sounds good to me! Take care of our Suhwan okay? Don’t lose him.”

“I’m not a child!” Suhwan complained.

“Sure.” Jihoon laughed, “Come on, let’s head back. Unless you’d prefer to go do something on your own?”

“No, I’m alright going with you.” Suhwan said, expression curious now, “Why do you need to head back so quickly?”

“I think my soulmate is at the hotel.” Jihoon admitted.

“What?” Suhwan’s eyes widened, “How do you know?”

“I had a few dreams. It’s just a theory but I’m gonna go back and check just in case.” Jihoon looked nervously out the window and willed the taxi to go faster, “I just hope I’m not too late.”

“Too late?” Suhwan echoed.

Jihoon grimaced, “I kinda got the feeling they were there when we first arrived in Chengdu. Because of the competition though, I didn’t want to get too distracted so I moved to that other hotel and decided to just focus on the game.”

“Oh.” Suhwan looked like he wasn’t sure what to say, “That must’ve been difficult.”

“Not really.” Jihoon admitted, “At the time it was easy.”

At the time it was, now it felt anything but easy. It was like he covered up a wound and reopened the bandage to find it infested with maggots. It was easy to forget about his proximity to his soulmate with other responsibilities looming, but now that he came face to face with the loneliness that festered, it was impossible to look away. He had to make it better. He had to find them. He couldn’t let this chance slip through his fingers more than it already has. The competition just ended. There was no way his person had already left.

The thought soothed Jihoon. If his theory was correct and his person was indeed there for MSI, there was no way they would have had time to check out of the hotel and leave already. If Jihoon just sat in the lobby until people stopped coming and going, he was sure to run into his soulmate. It wasn’t a bad plan. Although, if his soulmate decided to leave immediately, one night's worth of dreams would hardly be enough for Jihoon to go off of once he was back in Korea. His mood dimmed again. If only he had a month’s worth of dreams to glean hints from. He could’ve had that. It was within his grasp and he willingly gave it up. If he didn’t find his soulmate, he could no longer blame the universe. Now, it was his own choice. His own fault.

“This is kind of fun,” Suhwan whispered as they pulled on caps and face masks before seating themselves in a discreet corner of the lobby, “It’s like a stakeout.”

With how capable Suhwan was when it came to his job, Jihoon sometimes forgot just how young he was. It was nice to see him act like a kid sometimes. Suhwan looked over at him with bright and curious eyes, “Can you tell me about them?”

Jihoon tapped his finger idly against his knee as he watched people come and go. No one caught his eye. “Well, the only things I know definitively is that they’re pale and on the thinner side. They’re shorter than me by maybe 10cm?”

Suhwan looked mildly disappointed, “Oh. Is that all?”

“Well,” Jihoon looked thoughtful, “It’s all the concrete things. The rest are mostly educated guesses. For example, I think that it’s very likely they keep short nails and don’t use nail

polish. I also think they lean towards wearing lighter makeup. They have a unique lip shape but I can't seem to remember exactly what it is."

Jihoon's head hurt a little every time he tried to remember his dreams. He could only ever see bits and pieces. The familiar piano music floated through the lobby again and Jihoon let himself bask in it. He remembered dancing. He pictured the movements, awkward steps from two people that really weren't sure how dancing worked. They had fun regardless, wrapped in each other's arms. A pang of loss and excitement tugged at his heartstrings as Jihoon suddenly and vividly remembered the feeling of holding his soulmate in his arms— Their arms around his neck and his hands on their waist. They felt small and delicate in his hands.

"Hyung, manager-nim is asking if you're coming with us to see the pandas." Suhwan said, scrolling through his messages.

Jihoon pulled out his phone and glanced at the newest messages. "I probably won't go. I'm gonna stay at this hotel for another few nights and see if I can get any other clues."

"Let me know if you find out anything else! Maybe I can also keep an eye out for them." Suhwan offered. "I might need more specific things though."

"Thanks." Jihoon smiled, "Now you should go and do something fun. Celebrate. I can keep watch here myself. You've waited with me long enough."

"Okay hyung," Suhwan glanced at his phone again, "Siwoo hyung mentioned getting ice cream so it's good timing. Come join us if you ever take a break!"

Jihoon nodded even though he had no intention of taking any breaks. The opportunity was too important to pass up. If he missed his opportunity now, his soulmate would go from being one of maybe a few hundred at this hotel to being one out of the entire population of Korea. One option was definitely more feasible than the other, and even then it felt like finding a needle in a haystack. Jihoon rested his chin on his hand and continued to watch people come and go.

Too short. Too tall. Bright makeup. Long nails. Hands too small. Hands too calloused.

The people coming in and out of the hotel became a blur. At the very least, it was easy to pick out definitive “no”s, but picking out potential matches was a bit trickier. Too many people matched the vague guidelines he gleaned from his dreams. It wasn’t like Jihoon could just ask every single one of them for their name and stalk them on social media. If only he could get just a little bit more information. At this point, even though Jihoon was heavily leaning towards his soulmate being a man, even that wasn’t something he was certain about yet. Just a little more certainty would do wonders for his search.

Jihoon yawned.

The number of people coming and going was starting to dwindle. One of them had to be his soulmate right? His soulmate had to be here. If they weren’t here…..

If they weren’t here……..

~

Jihoon’s back hurt. He sat up with a groan, realizing he was still on the sofa in the hotel lobby. He didn’t even remember falling asleep, but his joints were certainly glad to remind him that he did sleep and that he slept incorrectly. It was dark out. The receptionist was already gone for the night. Jihoon checked the time. It was 3am. How long was he asleep?

Jihoon froze. He was asleep. He slept. That meant…..

No. No. Nonononononono. Jihoon grit his teeth and resisted the urge to punch something. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t recall dreaming. His soulmate. He didn’t run into his soulmate yesterday. How was that possible? His soulmate was both at MSI and at this hotel, how did Jihoon not even lay eyes on them for a second? It was possible of course. The crowd was huge and there was no guarantee they came in or out of the hotel while Jihoon was keeping watch. Maybe they even returned during the time Jihoon was asleep.

Jihoon chewed on his lip nervously as he checked the room availability for the hotel. From being fully booked when Jihoon arrived, the hotel now had nothing but open rooms. If his soulmate was truly here, there was a high chance they already left. But if they were one of the people who happened to stay another night, leaving early might mean that Jihoon would miss his chance yet again. But if he played the odds….

Not overthinking it, Jihoon grabbed his things and headed out the door. With how many rooms were vacated, the odds that his soulmate left were a lot higher than the odds that they were still here. Added onto the fact that Jihoon didn't dream about them, that made the possibility that they simply were no longer here all the higher. He shot a quick text to his teammates and manager that he was leaving for Korea early and then searched online for the earliest flight back to Korea. By some miracle, there was actually a flight available within the hour. That would be the first fortunate bit of news when it came to this seemingly hopeless search.

While waiting to board his flight, Jihoon went through the different places his soulmate would possibly be. One possibility was definitely that they were in other areas of China to sightsee. In that case, Jihoon could potentially run into them if he loitered near the airport waiting for their return. If they left ahead of Jihoon, that complicated things. That meant they would get to Korea before Jihoon and take a train to wherever they happened to live. It really wasn't feasible for Jihoon to scour the entire country. This was why Jihoon had to get back as soon as possible. As futile as the thought of waiting at the airport for days just in case his soulmate passed through, it was still a lifeline. The only lifeline he had now. He could hardly afford to be picky.

His head continued to buzz with thoughts as he settled into his seat on the plane. Jihoon appeased the feelings of despair with the reminder that his soulmate must be a fan of esports to travel for MSI. Jihoon could still run into them at future events. That just meant he needed to continue performing well. If he was at every major event, then surely he would see his soulmate again? There was no guarantee his soulmate would attend the regular season games, so Jihoon would just have to make it to every final and every international. Jihoon sighed and sat back in his seat. If the time came when he ran into his soulmate again at a competition, would he make the same choice he did this time? Was there really a choice to make? Wasn't it possible for him to focus on his career while also looking for his soulmate? Was it too selfish to wish for both?

"Attention passengers, please buckle your seatbelts and make sure seatbacks and tray tables are up. The plane will be making an emergency landing. Familiarize yourself with the nearest emergency exits. Oxygen masks will dispense from overhead, please ensure your own mask is secure before helping others…"

The drone of the announcer was pushed into the background as a clamour of confused murmurs rose from the crowd of people on the plane. The plane shook with turbulence and the voicer began to become increasingly urgent. Jihoon frowned and looked out the window. It was dark and stormy but didn't appear to be raining. A feeling of anxiety curdled in his stomach. As unrealistic as it was, this misfortune somehow felt like just another punishment from the universe. After all, the universe practically handed him his soulmate after he spent years lamenting the fact that it would be impossible to find them. Pushing that opportunity aside, wouldn't that have felt like he spit in their faces?

Jihoon shook the thoughts off. There was no use despairing over some faceless entity that probably didn't even exist. It was a new level of arrogance, thinking that the universe was personally punishing him. Self-centered, egotistical, self-important-

The plane jolted as it landed on the runway. Jihoon grabbed onto the seatrests as the plane continued to throw him around during the rocky landing. He could hardly complain though, he was on the ground. Alive. Looked like all his paranoia was for nothing. He breathed a sigh of relief when the plane came to a complete halt. Jihoon closed his eyes and listened to the announcements drone on. He was still in China it appeared, the storm that forced the plane to land preemptively hadn't hit yet but would likely halt flights for the foreseeable future. He needed to find a hotel then.

Would there be any hotels still available? Looking further at news reports, it seemed like multiple planes had been diverted to this airport over the past few days. Jihoon diligently checked every hotel in a 20 mile radius anyway. Several hotels had rooms listed as available but only open for in person booking. Jihoon cursed under his breath as he rushed to exit the airport and find a taxi. He needed to be fast or he would be stuck outside in the rain again. While the taxi drove him through the busy streets Jihoon sent a quick message to his teammates letting them know of his situation. Apparently the weather was still completely normal back where they were. Odd. So the freak storm was only in his area.

Jihoon thanked the driver and hurried through the doors of the hotel just as the rain was picking up. The lobby was swarming with people already. Jihoon looked at the crowd in dismay. The sound of Korean conversation filled his ears and he realized all these people were likely in the same situation as he was. The sight of someone sporting a T1 jersey almost made him laugh. What were the chances he caught the plane that happened to be filled with fans returning from MSI?

"It's Chovy!"

Excited whispers filled the air and Jihoon felt dread pool in his stomach. This was definitely not what he wanted to happen right now. Jihoon smiled politely as people crowded around him, too many voices speaking at once for him to properly respond to any of them. He could see people struggling through the crowd to get closer to him. The smile on his face wavered the more polite greetings he gave out to no one in particular. All he wanted to do was get to the front desk and book a room. And then maybe sleep for 12 hours straight.

A hand wrapped around his wrist and Jihoon instinctively jerked his hand away. The hand didn't let go. Instead, there was a soft yelping sound as the person grabbing onto him was pulled off his feet by Jihoon's attempt to shake them off. Jihoon narrowed his eyes as he zeroed in on the owner of the hand. He was completely obscured by a hood and cap, complete with a face mask. The only visible skin was the hand that was still wrapped around Jihoon's wrist. It was pale with fingers as long as they were thin. The hand tugged at him again, and this time Jihoon followed.

Mindless apologies slipped from his mouth as he pushed through the crowd. The hand wasn't gripping him as tight now, and Jihoon found himself needing to grab onto it in return in order not to lose them. He still wasn't sure why he was following, but there was something familiar about the sound of the surprised yelp and the sight of the pale fingers. They finally broke out of the crowd and the person let go of his hand and swerved towards the staircase. Jihoon found himself reaching out to grab the hand again, "Hey! Who are you?"

He must've pulled harder than he intended to, or maybe the other person was just easily moved, but they stumbled back and crashed into Jihoon. The person quickly found their balance again, pulling back and looking up at Jihoon with startled eyes.

Jihoon blinked in disbelief, "Sanghyeok hyung?"

"Shh," Sanghyeok shushed him quietly, lowering his head so that the cap obscured his face.

Sanghyeok let go of his hand completely now, trusting that Jihoon would follow voluntarily. Even so, Jihoon found himself reaching out to grab Sanghyeok's hand as they ducked into the stairwell and made their way furtively up the stairs. Whenever they heard the sound of someone else descending they escaped back out into the hallway until the footsteps passed.

There was something so childishly delightful about sneaking around like this. With the way Sanghyeoks eyes curved into crescents, he seemed to agree.

Once they made it to the fifth floor Sanghyeok tugged on Jihoon's hand and prompted him to sprint down the hallway. For a few seconds they ran without any cover and Jihoon found himself laughing breathlessly despite the risk of being spotted. Sanghyeok stopped at one of the rooms and opened the door to let them in. Once safely inside, Sanghyeok pulled off his cap and mask to reveal the smile on his face.

"You don't travel with a mask?" Sanghyeok asked, still breathless.

"I forgot it on the plane." Jihoon said sheepishly, "I didn't think it would be a problem."

Sanghyeok laughed, "Usually it wouldn't be, but you somehow managed to end up at the one hotel full of stranded esports fans."

"How did *you* end up here?" Jihoon wondered aloud.

"Emergency landing because of engine troubles, and then weather reports delayed any future flights," Sanghyeok explained, "Seeing how you weren't able to make it back either the weather must be getting worse."

"I think so." Jihoon sighed. It was just his luck that he was stranded the one time he needed to get back to Korea urgently.

Sanghyeok seemed to pick up on his sudden bad mood. He squeezed Jihoon's hand and the reminder that they were still holding hands was more than enough to snap Jihoon out of his thoughts. "It's alright," Sanghyeok comforted, "It's off season now that MSI is over, you can just think of this as an extended vacation in China. If you can't find any open rooms you're welcome to stay with me. Don't worry too much."

“Y-Yeah,” Jihoon stammered. He couldn’t even remember why he was upset anymore but he felt warm under Sanghyeok’s concerned gaze anyway. He felt disappointed when Sanghyeok let go to rummage through his backpack.

“Here, I have a spare face mask.” Sanghyeok offered, “It might make it easier for you to leave the room. Did you feel like going back down and seeing if any more rooms are open?”

“Not really.” Jihoon admitted.

“Stay with me then?” Sanghyeok suggested, sounding slightly hesitant, “No pressure of course.”

“Can I really?” Jihoon said, unable to keep the excited smile from rising to his face.

“As long as you want.” Sanghyeok said with a smile. “Are you tired from the flight? You can take a nap if you’d like.”

Jihoon opened his mouth to protest and was immediately consumed by a yawn. The half smug, half amused expression on Sanghyeok’s face made Jihoon want to pout like a mutinous child refusing to go to bed.

“Sleep.” Sanghyeok told him, gesturing towards the bed.

The firm tone of Sanghyeok’s voice had Jihoon’s body moving automatically. The stresses of the day seemed to melt away when he laid down on the plush hotel mattress. The pillow smelled nice, like something distinctly pleasant yet dissimilar to the scent of detergent or fabric softener. The soft scent enveloped him as his eyes slipped closed, sleep coming to him easily for once in his life.

Chapter End Notes

Will be back on a regular updating schedule now! Recovering from jet lag still so I hope this chapter is adequately spelling/grammar checked.

To everyone that left any comment on any one of my works, you're the best and I would bake you cookies if I could. All comments brighten my day just a little more.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was warm.

Jihoon sighed contentedly and trailed his fingers lightly over soft hair. The body laying on top of his stirred and Jihoon went still in an attempt not to disturb them.

“Jihoon?” A sleepy voice greeted his ears.

“Go back to sleep.” Jihoon said, his voice gentle.

The person tucked their head into the crook of Jihoon’s neck and settled down again. “You’re warm.” They murmured, curling as close to Jihoon as physically possible.

Jihoon stroked their hair. “You’re like a cat.”

“Is that a good thing?”

Jihoon smiled, “I like cats.”

“A good thing then.”

Jihoon ran his hand down their spine and felt them shiver under his touch. “You’re so cute.” He said, voice low.

They tilted their head upwards and Jihoon could feel their breath against his neck when they spoke again, “Hmm I thought you wanted me to go back to sleep?”

Jihoon ran his hand down their side and to their waist, “You can sleep.”

“You’re making it difficult.”

A gentle tug on his shirt prompted him to pull away just enough to lean down for a kiss. His hands threaded through short hair as he leaned into the heated touch. Jihoon tugged on the soft locks of hair experimentally and he was rewarded with a sharp gasp. The lips still pressed against his parted in surprise and Jihoon felt a jolt of frustration at his lack of knowledge on how to escalate things further without fumbling and ruining the moment. Instead, he was stuck with this burning urge to do something. But he didn’t know what that something even was.

“Jihoon?”

The breathless voice only made the burning sensation stronger.

“Jihoon?”

The face in front of him blurred.

“Jihoon!”

Jihoon’s eyes shot open to see Sanghyeok leaning over him with a concerned expression, “Are you okay? You looked like you were having a nightmare.”

“I’m fine.” Jihoon breathed. More than fine. His dream. His soulmate. This time everything was fresh in his mind. “Just give me a moment.”

The dreamy atmosphere and substanceless backdrop were too familiar for that dream to have been a normal dream. It had to be him. The memory of how his soulmate's body felt under his hands made him sure it was a man this time. A man with average length hair and a soft, low voice. If only Jihoon could remember more. If only Jihoon could remember what his face looked like. Jihoon sighed in frustration and ran a hand through his still messy hair. It felt like he was so close to solving the puzzle yet the answer was escaping him. He was missing something.

Then again……Jihoon found himself smiling. He had the dream. That meant his soulmate was here. It made sense. After all, this hotel housed a good number of the stranded fans returning from MSI. It was like the universe was offering him yet another chance even after he so callously cast aside the first one. This time the opportunity was less generous; Instead of the weeks and weeks he would've had previously, this time he only had until the storm cleared. He couldn't waste any time.

"Hyung, I'm going down to the lobby again." Jihoon called, pulling Sanghyeok's attention away from his book.

Sanghyeok didn't question the sudden declaration, instead nodding at the table, "The key card is on the table so you can get back in. Are you feeling better now?"

Jihoon gave him a cheerful smile, "I feel great. Thanks for letting me stay."

Sanghyeok's expression was soft, "Of course. Let me know if you're hungry later, maybe we could get lunch together? It's unfortunate we didn't get another opportunity back in Chengdu."

"Okay hyung." Jihoon grabbed the card off the table and headed back down to the lobby. This time he wasn't worried about being recognized. In fact, the more he was recognized the better. The news that he was here would no doubt spread quickly and his soulmate should be drawn out by the news. Even if his soulmate was here earlier and didn't manage to get a room, wouldn't he come to the hotel to see Jihoon anyway? That one was a bit less certain. What if they went to MSI to see T1 play? If so, they might not be too inclined to go out of his way to meet Jihoon just because he was here. Jihoon's anxiety spiked as his brain continued down that train of thought. If his soulmate was a T1 fan, wasn't there a possibility that they

actively disliked Jihoon and his team? The chances were slim, but the very possibility still made Jihoon nervous. It would be a cruel sort of irony if that was his reality. All these years estranged from his soulmate only for the universe to push them together after his soulmate already developed a dislike for him.

But surely being his soulmate would mean more than previous sentiments?

Jihoon chided himself for his overthinking. There really was no reason to be making problems out of nothing. First things first, he needed to find his soulmate. If they weren't at this hotel, Jihoon could just go to another one. There couldn't be that many in a reasonable distance. It was doable.

A gasp alerted Jihoon to the fact that he was finally spotted. There were fewer people this time and they approached him with nervous smiles. Jihoon smiled back and happily took a photo with them. Just as he expected, another person caught sight of him and headed his way.

"I-Is it okay if I post this online?"

Jihoon smiled, "Of course. I don't mind at all."

There it was. Step one of the plan was proceeding smoothly. Not even minutes after the person asked to post the photo, more and more people began to trickle into the lobby to ask for autographs or pictures. Every time a male fan approached him he took the time to survey their features. Even after what must've been hours of meeting fans, no one seemed to stand out to him.

"Can I get my jacket signed?"

Pale. Thin. Graceful looking hands. Jihoon kept his expression neutral as he scribbled his signature onto the back of the jacket. This was the first person that was close to the mental image he had of his soulmate after dozens of people with lukewarm resemblance. Jihoon couldn't let them get away until he was more certain.

“Did you want a photo too?” Jihoon asked, trying for his most charming smile.

Asking him a direct question, Jihoon was now free to study their face without being rude. Even though his soulmate’s face was the thing he had least information about, something about this person’s face didn’t look right. Jihoon stood for a photo and noted that the height of the person didn’t seem quite right either. Or maybe Jihoon was just nitpicking. Was it possible, with how much of a pedestal he placed his soulmate on, that no real person could match up to that expectation? Why did he find himself hoping it wasn’t this man? Jihoon watched the man thank him with a flustered smile and walk away with a giddy skip to his step. He was perfectly decent looking, kind, polite, and obviously a fan of Jihoon. So why did Jihoon feel disappointed at the thought that it might be him?

“Sorry, I think I’m heading back to my room now,” Jihoon apologized to the small crowd still gathered, “I’m a bit tired.”

A chorus of “it’s okay”s and “rest well”s followed him as he headed back up to the room he shared with Sanghyeok. Sanghyeok. Jihoon glanced at the time in panic. It was already 5pm. Did he really spend that long in the lobby greeting fans? Jihoon felt guilt welling up in him as he hurried to unlock the door. He was supposed to have lunch with Sanghyeok. Maybe they could still have dinner? Jihoon suddenly recalled the way he disappeared from the first hotel without even a text to let Sanghyeok know he found another place to stay. Now he disappeared for the entire day despite having lunch plans; Both times after Sanghyeok had so kindly given him a place to stay.

“Hyung?” Jihoon called as soon as he stepped into the room, “I’m sorry I was gone for so-”

The room was empty. The bed was neatly made and the room silent aside from the low hum of the heater. The only evidence that Sanghyeok had been here at all was the book lying on the couch. Jihoon walked over and picked it up. It was another one of those human psychology books Sanghyeok was so fond of reading. Jihoon set it back down with a small smile. Maybe he could get Sanghyeok a book as an apology for everything. Although, Sanghyeok probably wouldn’t accept any token of apology from him. Jihoon would have to call it a token of gratitude. He could get Sanghyeok two books, one as thanks and one as apology; Sanghyeok would never have to know the intention behind them.

Jihoon sat down on the couch next to the book and sighed. He leaned back and closed his eyes. The events of today felt unsatisfying to him. It felt like a day wasted despite the fact that he identified a potential candidate. He briefly considered going back down to greet more people, but quickly cast the thought aside. Not only did that sound exhausting, but meeting more people meant a larger pool of possibilities when it came to his soulmate. Jihoon sighed again. He didn't understand why he wasn't happy. He didn't understand why he was reluctant to dream again. He didn't understand why part of him hoped he didn't have one of those dreams tonight.

He really was such a shallow, horrible person. Deep down he knew why he felt this way, even if he didn't want to admit it. Even if he wished he didn't feel that way. Every person he met today had been so dreadfully *normal* . Plain. Unassuming. Boring. They didn't shine and glow and exude a presence so captivating that people couldn't help but orbit around him. None of them were as beautiful as the man in his dreams. When Jihoon dreamed, he felt like he was consorting with an angel. Laying his hands on something humans shouldn't dream of touching and letting himself get drunk on the feeling of divinity under his fingertips. Not a single person he met gave him that feeling, not even close. Despite not being in a position to be picky, Jihoon hoped his soulmate wasn't someone he met just now.

Maybe that was simply how it was. The idea of his soulmate would always be more than the real thing. Soulmates were something so revered and worshiped that no real person could ever live up to those expectations. Jihoon stared miserably up at the ceiling. Maybe, aside from those that were born special, everyone else was fated to meet disappointment no matter how desperately they searched. The heartache and pain– how extraordinary would the light at the end of the tunnel have to be to wash away the misery and strife?

Click.

Light streaked across the pale cream carpet as the door opened. The silhouette of a person emerged, the light shining behind them like a halo around their head. Even as he entered the dark room, remnants of light seemed to cling to him.

The lights in the room flickered on.

Sanghyeok looked startled to see Jihoon sitting on the couch in the previously dark room, "Jihoon?"

“Huh?” Jihoon snapped out of his daze and sat up, “Oh. Sorry hyung. I was just….I was spacing out I guess.”

“You’re back.” Sanghyeok’s smile was warm, “I brought some food for us if you’re hungry.”

Jihoon’s eyes widened, “Hyung I’m so sorry. I know we were supposed to get lunch together but I lost track of time and I shouldn’t let you know or anything at all I didn’t mean to-”

“Jihoon.” Sanghyeok interrupted with a firm yet amused tone, “You don’t need to apologize. It’s alright, when I passed by the lobby I saw that you were busy and assumed you wouldn’t be joining me for lunch. I ordered you extra for dinner in case you were hungry after skipping lunch.”

That only made Jihoon feel even more guilty. Looking at Sanghyeok more closely, there were still raindrops clinging to his hair and bits of mud on his shoes. He was holding an umbrella, neatly folded up but still damp from rainwater. Jihoon felt a tightness in his chest and moved automatically to take the heavy takeout bags from Sanghyeok and set them on the table. He wordlessly pulled the warmest sweater he owned from his suitcase and held it out to Sanghyeok.

Sanghyeok tilted his head, looking confused, “I have my own clothes.”

“Do you own anything that isn’t a cotton shirt given to you by some company you’re sponsored by?” Jihoon responded sharply.

“I-”

“No you don’t.” Jihoon said, not giving Sanghyeok a chance to argue, “I saw when you dug through all your stuff when you lent me clothes last time. The warmest jacket you have is the one you’re wearing right now, and it’s half soaked in rain.”

Sanghyeok looked moderately embarrassed, “I don’t know if your clothing will fit me.”

Something about Sanghyeok’s almost shy demeanor made Jihoon even bolder. “None of the clothing you wear now fits you properly anyway, just put the sweater on.”

“I- yeah. Okay.” Sanghyeok still looked flustered as he took the clothes from Jihoon. For a brief moment their fingers brushed against each other. Sanghyeok’s skin was cold as ice. “You can eat first.” Sanghyeok said quickly before retreating into the bathroom to change.

Jihoon stared at his own hand blankly and rubbed his thumb over the area Sanghyeok touched. It felt like he had been burned. He was filled with a visceral displeasure mixed with a strange yearning. All at once he was torn between too many emotions. First and foremost, he felt something akin to anger that the evening chill would dare touch Sanghyeok’s skin. It felt like an injustice that the cold should be allowed to pilfer the warmth from his veins and the rain permitted to kiss his cheeks. Secondly, and more confusingly, Jihoon felt the burning urge to touch Sanghyeok’s skin again; To take Sanghyeok’s hands in his own and have the heat of his body seep into Sanghyeok’s.

“Not hungry?” Sanghyeok’s voice once again pulled Jihoon back to reality. As Jihoon suspected, his clothes didn’t look all too out of place on the man that regularly wore clothes one size too big. The neck of the sweater hung a bit lower than it should and the sleeves enveloped Sanghyeok’s hands like they too were afraid his hands would get cold.

“Are you cold?” Jihoon said instead of answering.

“Hm?” Sanghyeok looked confused, “I’m okay, don’t worry about me.”

“I don’t believe you.” Jihoon said stubbornly, holding out his hand boldly, “Prove it.”

“My hands are always cold.” Sanghyeok argued even as he reached out to surrender his hands to Jihoon, “I don’t feel cold at all. I promise.”

With Sanghyeok's hands in his own, Jihoon found it hard to remember the reason he was holding them in the first place. They were as beautiful and elegant as they were cold. Jihoon could almost believe they were carved out of marble if not for the softness of his skin. Vibrant blue veins snaked around his fingers and down the back of his hand. His skin was so pale it almost looked translucent in the light. With every new observation, however, Jihoon admonished himself for ever comparing Sanghyeok to a statue. Not even Michelangelo himself could carve such beauty from lifeless marble.

"Are you okay?" Sanghyeok's voice was gentle, "You seem a bit off."

"I don't know." Jihoon said honestly. At this moment, he didn't know anything except that he wanted to keep holding Sanghyeok's hands.

"You must be tired from today." Sanghyeok said sympathetically.

"Yeah." Jihoon said, still staring down at their joined hands, "Today was a lot. I thought that…I thought it would make me happy if I-" Jihoon bit his lip. He couldn't say the truth. "I thought doing what I did today would make me happy, but I'm just tired."

Cold hands squeezed his.

"I'm sorry. Sometimes it's a lot. I can give you some space to recharge if you'd like." Sanghyeok offered.

"No." Jihoon said, too quickly, "Don't leave."

Sanghyeok's brow furrowed slightly but he didn't comment. Instead, he nodded at the food with a small smile, "Spicy food on a cold day?"

Jihoon smiled back, "Sounds good."

All the frustration and confusion of the day faded into the background as they talked about trivial things over takeout containers on a small hotel table. It was so easy to be certain in moments like these. He didn't have to know what he wanted for his future or whether the weight of his expectations would render him eternally dissatisfied; All he needed to know was that he wanted to continue talking to Sanghyeok even as the warmth of food in his stomach pulled at his eyelids. He blinked away the drowsiness until the world blurred around him and he was falling asleep at the table. The last thing he remembered as his head hit the pillow was the silent plea that his slumber was free of dreams.

Chapter End Notes

CHOKER NATION WE WIN BECAUSE WHAT DO YOU MEAN FAKER MANAGED TO PICK CHOVY AND THEN SAID THE MOST UNHINGED THING ABOUT HIM BEING OBEDIENT?????? The rating of his fic might go up with the ideas that one sentence is giving me.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jihoon buried his face against soft hair. The body pressed against his was warm and languid. The feeling of the body was familiar now. Of course it was, it was his soulmate after all. Jihoon wasn't sure if he wanted to let his soulmate sleep for longer or wake him up to savor the sound of his voice. He could sleep for longer, Jihoon decided, it was enough just to bask in his presence and hold him in his arms. A sweet and vaguely floral scent filled his every breath and made him feel lightheaded. Jihoon nuzzled against the back of his soulmate's neck and inhaled again. It was such an irresistible scent.

"Jihoon?" A sleepy voice mumbled.

"Yes my love?" Jihoon murmured against his skin. He pressed a kiss to the nape of his soulmate's neck, then another, and another, moving lower and lower each time. If he was awake anyways…

His soulmate chuckled softly, "This early in the morning?"

"Is that a problem?" Jihoon teased, biting down on the side of his soulmate's neck.

"Ah- no- it's-"

The soft gasps and breathless words did horrible things to Jihoon's self control. The way his soulmate shivered and whined didn't help either. Red marks bloomed too easily across pale skin. He wanted to leave more of them. He wanted to mark every inch of skin until even the heavens would admit that the angel in his arms belonged to Jihoon and Jihoon only.

Still moving on instinct, Jihoon trailed his hand lower until a jolt of nervousness snapped him out of his mindless lust. He had no idea how to do……..what was he even trying to do? In his moment of lucidity, Jihoon was suddenly acutely aware that he was dreaming. It was a dream. Even if he messed up and made a fool of himself in his inexperience, no one would

ever know. No. He couldn't. This was nothing like those hazy and half baked dreams every teenager had. This was too real. Too embarrassing.

Jihoon pulled back and took in the sight of his soulmate in his arms. Red marks and bruises covered his neck, scattered like rose petals across pale skin. The jacket he was wearing slipped down his bare shoulders and Jihoon realized numbly that the jacket his soulmate was wearing belonged to him. It was a sight to behold– the jacket with Jihoon's name blazed across it sliding invitingly down graceful shoulders to reveal a new expanse of unmarked skin. The message was clear as day: This was his person. The person he was destined to love and the person he was drowning in desire for, the proof of his thirst littered accusingly across otherwise unblemished skin. This was his person, and there was no escaping it.

Jihoon sat up with a gasp, his entire body trembling. The remnants of desire still flowed through his body, making him nauseous. Somehow, despite the warm and rosy contents of the dream, it felt like a punishment. It felt like he was being force fed feelings that he didn't feel when he was awake, feelings he didn't want to feel towards any of the people he met yesterday. Was this because he resented the plainness of his potential soulmate? Didn't the universe know that these dreamy and utopian images did nothing but make reality even more disappointing? Or maybe that was the intention, to punish him for even daring to be disappointed by making the distance between his hopes and his reality even greater.

Yet…..

Jihoon curled into a ball and hugged his legs to his chest. In the beginning of his dream, he truly was happy. His soulmate was everything he wanted and more and he was incredibly, hopelessly, stupidly happy. Maybe he shouldn't think so pessimistically. Maybe the point of the dream was to show him what his relationship could be if he simply gave his soulmate a chance, if he looked past superficial judgments and got to know the man. Even as the thought formed, Jihoon found himself rejecting it. He didn't want that man to be his soulmate. He didn't want to give him a chance or push away his childish desire for his "love at first sight" moment. Was it really too much to ask for? To be overcome with joy and passion upon finding out a person was his soulmate?

Maybe that's what it was. The third option. The optimistic option. Not a punishment and not a push to give the nameless man a chance, maybe the message the dream was trying to convey was a reminder of how it was supposed to feel, a push to continue searching and not get caught up on physical features and false leads. After all, the physical parameters Jihoon was working with were still on the generic side. Just because he only met one person that matched them yesterday didn't mean that his soulmate had to be that person. Maybe his

dream was just reminding him to keep an open mind. If he tunnel visioned on a single person, he would overlook other possibilities.

“Jihoon?”

Jihoon broke out of his thoughts and turned to see Sanghyeok blinking sleepily up at him. He rubbed his eyes and began to push himself into a sitting position.

“No, no,” Jihoon hurried to reassure Sanghyeok that he didn’t need to get up, “I just woke up early. Don’t worry. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

Jihoon snatched his hands back when he realized he was touching Sanghyeok’s shoulders in his effort to convince him to lay down again. Sanghyeok didn’t seem to notice his embarrassment, laying down again without much of a protest. “Have you checked flights again?” Sanghyeok mumbled drowsily.

“Uh, not yet.” Jihoon fumbled to find his phone. A simple search told him that the sudden bad weather was only getting worse by the minute. Jihoon frowned, “It looks like it’s only getting worse. No flights.”

“I see.” Sanghyeok may have been laying down again, but he didn’t seem all that tired anymore. He was still looking up at Jihoon in a way that made Jihoon feel warm all over. From this angle Sanghyeok looked so small and……cute? That wasn’t a weird thing to think. No. Anyone would look cute bundled up in blankets like that. Especially with the messy hair. Jihoon attributed his staring to the fact that Sanghyeok didn’t have glasses on. It was natural to stare when something familiar suddenly looked different.

“I might do some sightseeing while I’m stranded here.” Sanghyeok mused.

Jihoon made a face, “In the rain?”

“I like the rain.” Sanghyeok said, “The sound of it on the umbrella is calming. So is the smell of it.”

“I guess so.” Jihoon said, unconvinced.

Sanghyeok laughed, sitting up again and stretching, “You can come with me if you want to?” he offered, “Get a new perspective on what it’s like to walk around in the rain.”

Rain….

Jihoon smiled. He did have a few good memories in the rain, even if those memories weren’t in real life. Remembering the warm smile of his soulmate made the rainy atmosphere seem oddly romantic. The sound of raindrops drowned out all other background noise until they were in their own little world. “I guess I do see how you could like the rain.” Jihoon conceded.

“Do you still have the umbrella I gave you?” Sanghyeok asked with a smile.

Jihoon smiled back, “Of course I do.”

Sanghyeok swung his legs over the side of the bed and put his glasses back on. “Want to walk to a nearby bakery then? We can get something for breakfast.”

“Sure.”

They both threw on the warmest and most raincoat adjacent clothes they owned and headed out of the hotel. The pitter patter of rain was nowhere as gentle as the rain in Jihoon’s dreams. Instead, the rain was more like shower water from a cheap shower head. Standing under separate umbrellas, any conversation that may have sparked between them fizzled out amidst the awkward distance and the sound of the falling water. It wasn’t until they finally ducked into a cozy bakery that Jihoon heard Sanghyeok’s voice inquire about whether he was cold or not.

“I’m fine.” Jihoon assured. He glanced over the selection of various foods, “What’s good here?”

“Steamed buns are always a safe bet,” Sanghyeok said, “The ones with barbecue pork are good. Or if you want something sweet, the sesame balls are a good choice.”

“You choose for me.” Jihoon said.

Sanghyeok turned to him with a playful smile, “Why, so you don’t have to be the one ordering?”

“If you order I’ll pay?” Jihoon offered.

Sanghyeok rolled his eyes, fondness apparent in the curve of his lips, “I’ll take care of it.”

Sanghyeok approached the lady at the counter with a friendly smile and pointed at the items he wanted. Thankfully she seemed to catch on quickly even with the language barrier and quickly packed their food into a bag with an amused expression. As soon as she returned to the cash register Jihoon and Sanghyeok both held out their cards. The lady looked startled, glancing back and forth between the two of them. Jihoon turned to Sanghyeok with a pout, “I thought I was paying?”

“I never agreed to that.” Sanghyeok said with a barely suppressed smile.

“That’s not fair,” Jihoon whined. He turned his sulky expression to the lady as she continued to look between the two of them. Her eyes lingered on Jihoon before glancing back at Sanghyeok and she giggled before taking the card from Jihoon. Jihoon met Sanghyeok’s expression of mild surprise with a smug look. The lady rang up their order and mouthed a quiet “jia you!” to Jihoon when she handed his card back. Jihoon wasn’t completely sure what she was implying but his ears reddened anyway.

“The rain is picking up,” Sanghyeok said with a frown as they stepped outside. That was the last thing Jihoon was able to hear Sanghyeok say before the sound of the rain drowned him out. Jihoon was suddenly irked at the size of the umbrellas. Because the umbrellas couldn’t overlap, they were walking so far from each other that they may as well have been strangers. At this distance it didn’t even feel like Jihoon had company at all. He might as well have been taking a walk by himself in the pouring rain. The jostling of other people didn’t help either. In the crowd of umbrellas, Jihoon quickly found himself not being able to find Sanghyeok at all. If they weren’t heading to the same destination, Jihoon was sure they would’ve gotten separated.

A wave of relief hit him as the warm air in the hotel washed over him. Jihoon shook the rain off his umbrella, his face lighting up in a smile when he saw Sanghyeok appear at the doorway not long after. He ducked inside and wiped the water from his glasses with an adorably disgruntled look on his face. Jihoon resisted the urge to brush the raindrops from Sanghyeok’s hair. As soon as Sanghyeok wiped his glasses clean he pulled his hood back on and ducked his head. Jihoon followed suit, hiding his face as they navigated the ever crowded lobby of the hotel filled with more stranded people hopeful to find open rooms.

“Are you still trying to get your own room?” Sanghyeok asked suddenly once they were safely alone in the stairwell.

Jihoon’s good mood wavered, “Oh. I, uh, haven’t found one yet.”

“You’ve been looking then?”

“Yeah.” Jihoon lied.

“I see.” Sanghyeok looked thoughtful, “I was just thinking about the people in the lobby. There must not be many places left if you can’t find a room anywhere. I hope those people are all okay.”

So that was why Sanghyeok was asking. Jihoon breathed a sigh of relief. Sanghyeok wasn’t subtly trying to kick him out. Jihoon offered Sanghyeok a tentative smile, “At least if I stay with you then that’s one more room available for someone else that needs it.”

Maybe Jihoon was imagining it, but Sanghyeok looked relieved too. Sanghyeok returned the slightly hesitant smile, “That’s true, although I feel bad making you share.”

Jihoon gave Sanghyeok an incredulous look, “How are *you* making *me* share? You were here first. I’m the one forcing you to share.”

“That doesn’t count.” Sanghyeok said dismissively, opening the door to their room and beginning to unpack the food onto the table.

“Why not?” Jihoon argued.

“Because I was glad to offer you a place to stay.” Sanghyeok reasoned, “You were made to stay due to circumstance.”

“Not true.” Jihoon denied, “Even if there were other rooms available I would want to stay with you.”

“It’s easy for you to say that when the other option isn’t even a possibility,” Sanghyeok countered. Before Jihoon could spew out an argument that would potentially embarrass himself, Sanghyeok pushed a plate of various steamed breakfast items at him, “One of each. Try them.”

Jihoon sat down and obediently took a bite of the steamed bun. It was still warm even after making the trip back to the hotel through the rain. Sanghyeok took a photo of his food and tapped away at his phone with a smile. He must’ve been sending it to his teammates, Jihoon guessed. Or maybe it was someone else? The smile on his face was so filled with fondness that it could’ve easily been towards a romantic partner too. Sanghyeok said he didn’t find his soulmate, but he never said he wasn’t dating anyone at all. Maybe that was why he was satisfied without his soulmate while simultaneously harboring fear that he would someday have a change of heart. If he already had a partner of course he wouldn’t care about soulmates. It was fairly common these days for people with generic soulmarks to just date other people. Most people with distinctive marks met their other half no later than 30, meaning that Sanghyeok most likely already met his soulmate and just passed them by. It made sense that he would just choose to date someone else instead. No sense in waiting. It all made sense, so why did the thought annoy Jihoon so much?

“What are you thinking about?”

Jihoon silently scolded himself for letting his train of thought run wild again. He was making groundless speculations. There was no evidence that Sanghyeok was dating anyone. But what if he was right? Jihoon bit the inside of his cheek and glanced up to meet Sanghyeok’s curious expression. He needed to play this correctly if he was going to get the answer he wanted. Jihoon conjured up a carefree smile, “I was just considering whether I should send a photo to my teammates too, but we don’t send food pictures often.”

Sanghyeok laughed sheepishly, “I suppose it’s just a habit for me. We always send each other pictures when we eat without each other. Even something as small as a yogurt sample at the supermarket will be sent just so we all live vicariously through each other.”

“Well, what did they think of our breakfast then?” Jihoon asked, maintaining an expression of passive curiosity.

Sanghyeok flipped his phone around to show Jihoon the screen. Surely enough, Sanghyeok was texting his teammates. The most recent message displayed was a photo Minseok sent of himself with an ice cream cone and the other three in the background holding their own various dessert items. Jihoon smiled, partially from the confirmation that Sanghyeok was indeed only texting his teammates and partially because of Minseok’s response. “They’re having ice cream for breakfast?” Jihoon said with a laugh.

“The joys of vacation I suppose.” Sanghyeok said wryly.

“What, you don’t approve?” Jihoon teased.

“It’ll upset their stomachs.” Sanghyeok sighed.

“You sound like a disappointed parent.” Jihoon laughed, “It’s oddly endearing.”

“I do my best to encourage healthy habits, that’s all,” Sanghyeok said, looking slightly embarrassed.

Jihoon smiled even wider, encouraged by Sanghyeok’s flustered response to his teasing. He leaned closer, “Any good habits I should be learning from you then? You can scold me if you want to. I won’t take offense.”

“Why would I-” Sanghyeok’s cheeks reddened slightly. He shot Jihoon a pouty look, “You’re making fun of me.”

“No I’m not,” Jihoon rested his chin on his hand and stared shamelessly back at Sanghyeok, “I said your fretting was endearing. That’s a good thing. I wouldn’t mind if you acted the same towards me, especially if it means I’ll pick up a good habit or two along the way.”

“I- uh- thank you. I should clean up.” Sanghyeok looked away, busying himself with cleaning up the boxes and plates on the table. He carefully folded everything into their original shapes and stacked them neatly before placing them back into the plastic bag. Either Sanghyeok was meticulous even about how he disposed of his trash or he was purposefully finding an excuse not to look at Jihoon.

“You’re ignoring me.” Jihoon accused, a childish whine tingeing his voice. Maybe it was the warm food in his stomach or the oddly domestic atmosphere, but Jihoon found that he felt completely at ease. At ease enough to shamelessly demand Sanghyeok’s attention at least.

“I’m cleaning up.” Sanghyeok defended himself.

“You didn’t even respond properly to what I said,” Jihoon whined, “What do you think hyung? After living with me for a bit, any habits I should work on?”

“You skipped multiple meals yesterday.” Sanghyeok said immediately.

“I was busy, that doesn’t count.” Jihoon said defensively even though he was the one that asked Sanghyeok for criticism.

“That isn’t an excuse,” Sanghyeok said firmly, “If you neglect self care every time you’re busy it becomes a never ending cycle. The moment you allow yourself one excuse it opens the door for a hundred others.”

Jihoon pouted, “That was harsh.”

Sanghyeok smiled, a playful glint in his eyes when he finally looked at Jihoon again, “You did say I could scold you didn’t you? Or are you taking that back?”

“Fine.” Jihoon conceded. He couldn’t help but smile at the sight of Sanghyeok smiling. “Go on, scold me more then.”

“You need to drink more water. Especially in the morning to rehydrate and while you eat to ease your digestion.”

“I didn’t have any water.” Jihoon mumbled.

“You also shouldn’t slouch like that.” Sanghyeok said. He walked around the table and tapped Jihoon’s back. Jihoon immediately straightened up like he had been shocked. Sanghyeok’s hands moved to Jihoon’s shoulders and gripped them firmly, “Move your shoulders back like this. It’ll help the alignment of your spine. Don’t raise them up like this either, relax.”

“Right, relax.” Jihoon said, mostly to himself. The comfortable atmosphere from earlier was nowhere to be found. Suddenly, Jihoon felt his skin heating up and his heart beating out of his chest. It felt like his entire existence was tethered to reality by the feeling of Sanghyeok’s fingers trailing down his spine. Sanghyeok gently prompted him to relax again and Jihoon fumbled to remember how to control his own body properly.

“Hmm, your muscles are really tense.” Sanghyeok noticed, “Is it from all the traveling? Or maybe the mattress on the bed isn’t the kind you’re used to? No wonder you’ve been having trouble sleeping.”

“Y-Yeah.” Jihoon praised himself for the fact that his voice came out sounding even vaguely normal when Sanghyeok was rubbing his thumbs in gentle circles in between Jihoon’s shoulder blades. The sensation was violently pleasant and nowhere near relaxing. It was probably intended to be, but each time Sanghyeok applied even the slightest bit of pressure it felt like volts of electricity were shooting through his body. It was an embarrassing overreaction to the simple touch. Maybe Jihoon was just *that* touch starved.

“I feel better.” Jihoon blurted. He stood up, moving away from Sanghyeok’s hands as he did so. The charged feeling in his body didn’t fade completely even when Sanghyeok was no longer touching him, but it faded from the vibrant electricity to a dull buzz. “I didn’t realize I was so tense. Must be the mattress.” Jihoon rambled, “I guess I’m still not used to hotel beds. They’re always too soft.”

“That makes sense.” Sanghyeok mumbled. He looked about as embarrassed as Jihoon felt. “Sorry about that, by the way. I do that sometimes when I fix Hyeonjun’s posture and I didn’t realize it might make you uncomfortable. I forgot that I wasn’t- that we were- I’m just- sorry about that.”

Jihoon cursed under his breath. Maybe he didn’t quite hide his reaction as well as he thought. Jihoon widened his eyes in a fake innocent expression, “What are you talking about hyung? I said that it helped, why would you think it made me uncomfortable?”

The look of confusion on his face must have been more believable than his feigned nonchalance earlier, because the apologetic look on Sanghyeok’s face vanished in favor of a look of confusion mirroring Jihoon’s. Sanghyeok frowned, “I guess I was overthinking it. You just looked a bit uncomfortable and I realized I probably overstepped a boundary.”

“Of course not.” Jihoon nudged Sanghyeok in a friendly gesture, relieved when the brief touch didn’t trigger the feeling of electricity again. Maybe his muscles were just tense after all. That was a more palatable explanation for why he responded the way he did to the feeling of Sanghyeok’s hands on his back. “You really don’t have to worry so much hyung. You didn’t make me uncomfortable at all.”

“I suppose there’s just a bit of a disconnect between how comfortable I feel around you and how much time we’ve actually spent together.” Sanghyeok mused, “I tend to do things and then realize afterwards that perhaps it isn’t appropriate.”

“I thought we established that our in-game time counts as time spent together?” Jihoon joked, “That means we’ve been friends for years now. If you feel comfortable then you can act comfortable.”

“The same goes for you then,” Sanghyeok said, “No more acting apologetic about staying with me.”

“Fair trade.” Jihoon agreed, “The next person to apologize for something unnecessarily lets the other person treat them to dinner?”

Sanghyeok tilted his head, “Shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

“Usually it would be, but it’s like pulling teeth getting you to let me pay for anything,” Jihoon complained lightheartedly, “It feels like a suitable punishment to force you to sit by and let me treat you.”

“You’re stubborn.” Sanghyeok observed.

Jihoon smiled, “So are you.”

Sanghyeok broke away from Jihoon’s gaze to finish wiping down the table, “What are your plans for the rest of the day?” he asked, changing the subject.

Oh.

The light and cheery mood immediately dimmed. Jihoon sighed. He needed to go find his soulmate. Yesterday confirmed that his soulmate was in the hotel, Jihoon just had to go find them. It all felt like a chore. He didn't even know how to feel about his dreams anymore. On one hand, if his soulmate truly imbued him with that feeling of love so intense he could only call it worship, then this would all be worth it. On the other hand, it was fully possible that those feelings he felt in his dream were simply unrealistic to have towards a living and breathing human being. In that case, Jihoon was only chasing his own disappointment with this fruitless search.

"Jihoon?"

"Huh?" Jihoon refocused to meet Sanghyeok's curious expression, "Oh, I'm…I'm a bit tired. I think I might just stay in the hotel for today. Wander around a bit. It's a pretty big place."

"I see," Sanghyeok's expression dimmed slightly, "Did you want me to keep you company?"

"No!" Jihoon said quickly, "No, I'll be fine. You go out and enjoy the city. We can get dinner when you're back?"

"That sounds good." Sanghyeok studied Jihoon's expression carefully and frowned like he couldn't find what he was looking for. He turned and headed towards the door, slipping on his jacket and checking his pockets to ensure he had his phone and keycard. Jihoon stood and watched as Sanghyeok prepared to leave, covering up his face carefully and pulling his hood over his hair. Sanghyeok paused before stepping outside, turning around to look back at Jihoon, "Don't skip lunch again okay?"

"Okay hyung. I won't." Jihoon promised. For some reason the words felt like tar in his mouth and lead in his stomach. With Sanghyeok went the remainder of his lighthearted mood. All that was left was the dread and uncertainty etched into his fate in rainbow lettering. Over the years the meaning of those letters changed and shifted. At the time, each change seemed like the end of the world, but Jihoon would give anything to return to the days of childish wonder and jaded self pity. Even when the words felt like a curse, a reminder that he wasn't good enough, an omen that he was never destined for greatness, the words had never felt so *real* .

The words used to be an idea. A symbol. A physical entity that Jihoon attributed his insecurities and self-doubt onto. It was Jihoon himself that twisted the idea that his soulmate

would be hard to find into something intertwined with his identity. He was in control of what the words meant to him. It had never been about the soulmate themself or the person they were. It was never about a real person that lived and breathed and laughed and cried. It was a concept. It wasn't real.

Until it was.

All this time, Jihoon thought about finding his soulmate as a way to prove that he could overcome fate with his own hands. In his mind, if he could find his soulmate, he would beat the game. He would win. In this fantasy of his, finding his soulmate meant so much more than love and companionship– it symbolized so much more than that. And that wasn't reality.

Reality was that his soulmate was just a person. A person that the universe decided would be compatible as a life partner to Jihoon. A person that *would've* been a compatible life partner with Jihoon had he not piled all these burdens and expectations onto them. Was it still possible for him to be satisfied with whoever fate tied him with? Was it still possible for Jihoon to come face to face with his soulmate and feel something other than disappointment? He almost wished his soulmate could remain an ephemeral concept Jihoon could mold into whatever suited him the best, but it was too late for that. His soulmate was all too real now. Now that Jihoon knew it was possible to find him, he felt like he had to. If he didn't, he would go through his entire life with disappointment hanging like a knife above his head.

At least if he found his soulmate the knife would finally drop and the looming dread would disappear. Or maybe, the sliver of hope Jihoon was holding onto, his soulmate would be everything he ever hoped for. He would meet every unrealistic expectation Jihoon dreamt up over the years and the knife over his head would turn out to have been nothing but a figment of his imagination. That small chance, no matter how unlikely it was, made it all worth it. Holding onto the memory of the angel in his dreams, Jihoon finally found the strength to stand up and walk through the door.

Chapter End Notes

I was typing and typing and before I knew it I wrote 4k words without progressing the plot at all, how much more of this before I have to add the slow burn tag? 😅

Reading comments is the best part of my week, it really makes a week of stress dissipate like it was never there. I can never thank everyone enough for taking the time to write one 🥹

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jihoon was bored out of his mind.

Throughout the day he must've walked around the entire hotel a thousand times. He was sure he could remember the layout even better than the architect that designed it at this point. Hiding his face this time made the experience much more bearable, he wasn't sure how he would've handled a full day of social interaction again. A good dose of fan interaction once in a while was always an energy boost, but social interaction is social interaction at the end of the day, and Jihoon's social battery wasn't quite robust enough for that right now.

This time Jihoon identified far more people that matched up to his vague description of his soulmate. Although, at this point, he wasn't even sure if that was a good thing or not. None of the potential candidates stood out to him in any way. Granted, that was an unfair assessment since he hadn't actually spoken to any of them. Jihoon sighed, why couldn't it be like the movies where one look was all it took to fall hopelessly in love? Why couldn't real life have that sort of certainty? Well, Jihoon amended, some people's lives did. He just wasn't one of the lucky ones. Jihoon wandered back down into the front lobby and sat down on one of the couches– From here he could see people come and go with ease.

Rain still poured steadily outside, driving more and more people into the shelter of the hotel. The crowd was a lot smaller than yesterday, Jihoon noticed. Most of the stranded people must've found another place to stay. He did a quick search to confirm once again that there were no flights going in or out of this area anymore. At least with all the flights canceled no more people would get stranded out in the storm. His phone pinged and he glanced down to see a weather alert pop up.

Flood warning.

Power outages.

Tsunami alert.

Jihoon frowned at the messages and glanced outside again. The rain did look a bit heavier than before but nothing too alarming. Maybe the alerts weren't meant for his area specifically. Even so, maybe he shouldn't stay outside for too long until the weather settles down. A spike of anxiety prickled at his skin when he remembered that Sanghyeok said he was going out sightseeing today. Was he okay? Did he get caught in the storm? How far out did he go?

Jihoon bit his lip and pulled up his messaging app. Should he text Sanghyeok? Or maybe that was too overboard. It was still hours until it was a socially acceptable time to eat dinner, as long as Sanghyeok was back before then it would be okay; It wasn't odd at all for him to not be back yet. Jihoon forced himself to close the app and sighed. It would definitely be weird to check on him randomly like this. Sanghyeok already told Jihoon he was going sightseeing today, Jihoon had no reason to pester him further. Or did he? There was a weather alert after all. That was as good of a reason as any.

No. Jihoon pocketed his phone and stood up. He shouldn't bother Sanghyeok yet. Instead, he should be proactive and buy them food for tonight. If he went out and got food, then Sanghyeok wouldn't have to go out in the rain to get it himself. It was perfect. Jihoon suddenly felt a lot more cheerful as he looked up nearby restaurants. The quest to find the perfect takeout option was definitely more manageable than the wild goose chase he sent himself on today. Even after a day of staring down every person in the hotel, Jihoon was no closer to finding his soulmate and no closer to quieting the disappointment that nagged at him whenever he even thought about his potential options. Since when was he this shallow? He was never this shallow before! Why did he feel so critical of every person he looked at?

The flaws he fixated on were nothing short of ridiculous. Jihoon ran into several objectively attractive people that fit his parameters yet he still found something to dislike about them. Too well dressed. Too muscular. Too tall. Too short. Eyelashes too long. Hair too short. Incorrect ratio of handsome to pretty to cute. He needed to have all three of those traits, but they had to exist at the specific equilibrium Jihoon had in his mind. It was truly ridiculous. Jihoon felt like he was just making up reasons not to like them at this point. Why was that? Was he scared of finding his soulmate? Was it better to live with the hope that his soulmate was someone special than to meet them and be disappointed? Would he really throw away his chance for fear of disappointment? Would he choose the idea of his soulmate over the person themself?

Food. Right. Jihoon shook away the thoughts and continued to scroll through the restaurants nearby. He should get something warm and hearty. Jihoon smiled when he came across a hotpot restaurant. It wouldn't quite be the same as going to a proper hotpot place, but

ordering a curated bowl of hotpot was the best option they had right now. Maybe after they went back to Korea Jihoon could invite Sanghyeok to get actual hotpot with him. Jihoon placed the order and was grateful to see that they offered a delivery option. He would've made the trek through the rain to get Sanghyeok food, but he didn't mind avoiding it if it was possible. Maybe this was a good time to message Sanghyeok then? Just to make sure Sanghyeok didn't pick up food on his way back.

"Ordered food for us! We can heat it up when you get back so take your time."

Ding.

Jihoon's face brightened at the instant response.

"I was just about to ask you what kind of food you wanted me to pick up on my way back."

Jihoon smiled smugly as he typed his response.

"Too late hyung, I was faster this time. The food is already on its way."

"I'll pick up dessert then." Sanghyeok replied instantly.

"What do you want?"

"I'm not telling you or you'll order it."

Jihoon huffed. *"and you call ME stubborn."*

"We can both be stubborn." Sanghyeok suggested. Jihoon could almost see his smile through the text.

“nothing will get done if we’re both stubborn.”

“What do you mean? We’re both stubborn and now we have dinner AND dessert :)”

“I’ll be back in twenty minutes.”

“Just tell me what you want :(”

“It’s too cold for you to go looking for a dessert shop.”

No response. Jihoon pocketed his phone, disappointed. Sanghyeok was probably walking back now. It would be difficult to text while holding the umbrella. His phone buzzed and Jihoon was embarrassingly eager as he pulled his phone out of his pocket again. The excitement fizzled out as quickly as it sparked when Jihoon saw that it was from the delivery app. His food was here. Jihoon met the delivery man at the door and thanked him for the food. He still had a good amount of time left before Sanghyeok would be back from his outing. Jihoon hummed to himself as he laid out the food in bowls and plates on the table. This way the food wouldn’t look so much like takeout, plus it would be easy to reheat when Sanghyeok arrived. Once the food was sorted, Jihoon wandered down to the lobby to look around the gift shop and convenience store.

Maybe he could buy something sweet here? The selection of various drinks was tempting, but he was pretty sure Sanghyeok mainly drank water. Most of the books they had in stock were in Chinese so those were hardly an option either. Jihoon smiled to himself when he walked into the clothing section. Most of the clothing was glaringly tourist-y and the thought of Sanghyeok wearing a shirt that said “I love Shanghai” in bright green text made him laugh. Maybe Sanghyeok was right, there was a certain charm to being a shamelessly tacky tourist. If he ever traveled with Sanghyeok just for the sake of traveling, he would want to get something like this. They would wear matching shirts and pose for a photo in front of whichever landmark was the most famous and overrated. Jihoon shook off the thought. When would they ever go on vacation together just for fun? It was a ridiculous thought.

Jihoon placed the shirt back onto the rack and checked his phone. Still no message from Sanghyeok. A quick glance at the timestamp told Jihoon that it had already been twenty

minutes, meaning Sanghyeok should be back anytime now. Jihoon felt excitement bubble up in his chest and he all but skipped back into the main lobby. Should he wait for Sanghyeok in the lobby? Or should he wait back in their room? Jihoon caught sight of a familiar black and red jacket and his heart skipped a beat before he realized the person wearing it was most definitely not Sanghyeok. Of course not, Sanghyeok wasn't going to wear his team jacket out in public. The reminder that the place was filled with esports fans was enough for Jihoon to decide that waiting in the room was probably the best option. If he stuck around and got recognized it would be a mess he didn't have time to deal with today.

The food was still decently warm when Jihoon got back to the room but he put each bowl in the microwave for another minute just to make sure the soup would be hot enough to have the relaxing effect it was intended to. With the rain still pouring down Jihoon was sure Sanghyeok would appreciate a nice hot bowl of soup right now. Once the table was set again, Jihoon checked the mirror to make sure his hair wasn't too much of a mess from wearing the cap all day. The cap definitely did a number on his hair, but it was nothing a splash of water and a hairbrush couldn't fix. Jihoon smiled at himself in the mirror once his hair was satisfactory. Even if it didn't matter, it still felt good to look good. It wasn't like he was trying to impress anyone.

Another glance at the time told Jihoon that Sanghyeok was now running over ten minutes late. Jihoon frowned. Should he be concerned? Minseok has complained about Sanghyeok's lateness on many occasions, but he was never late by a glaring amount of time. Ten minutes wasn't too egregious though, so perhaps it was still within the normal scope of Sanghyeok's tardiness. Jihoon occupied himself with scrolling through social media to kill time. Seeing posts of fans sharing photos they took with him made him smile. Even if his underlying motive stressed and drained him, actually meeting fans was always something special to experience. The good mood was immediately dimmed when Jihoon noticed one of the posts was from a person matching the potential physical traits of his soulmate. Jihoon reluctantly saved the name of the account to his notes and turned his phone off again. Jihoon really didn't want to think about that right now.

Even the reminder of his soulmate search brought the negativity and gloom from the day back into his mind. What a hopeless endeavor it was. Whether he found his soulmate or not, there was a chance he would end up unhappy. What a cruel yet self-inflicted fate. Was it a result of his ambition that he refused to be satisfied with his soulmate if they didn't meet his impossible standards? Yet, at the same time, he also refused to be satisfied with someone that wasn't his soulmate at all. He didn't want to settle for less. He didn't want to settle for someone just because they were his soulmate and he didn't want to settle with someone that wasn't his soulmate either. It was ridiculous. Jihoon cast the swarm of thoughts into the back of his mind again and refocused on the situation at hand.

Still no message from Sanghyeok. The seed of worry quickly grew into active concern now that Sanghyeok was almost half an hour late. If Sanghyeok was running late he would have texted unless his phone was out of battery. Right? That was the most likely reason for the lack of communication, but it also meant that Sanghyeok might have trouble finding his way back to the hotel. Navigating a foreign country without a phone or internet connection was a nightmare. If Sanghyeok was lost, what could Jihoon even do?

Freaking out was a tempting but definitely unhelpful option. Instead, Jihoon decided to text Minseok just in case Sanghyeok told him or his teammates anything. Luckily Minseok's response was instant, showing a screenshot of Sanghyeok's location with the caption "he's moving". Jihoon squinted at the screen and was relieved to see that the little blue dot wasn't far away from the location of the hotel. No longer concerned about being recognized, Jihoon hastily pulled on his jacket and mask and headed down to the lobby. The lobby was even busier than before. It looked like the rain really picked up in the last hour.

Jihoon shouldered his way through the crowd to wait by the entrance. The rain really was pouring down now. Water ran in small streams down the side of the road and the entire sidewalk glistened like a lake. Whenever the doors slid open to let someone in, water flowed through the entrance to create muddy puddles all over the once pristine tile floor. The door opened again, this time a familiar figure stumbling through the entrance.

Jihoon almost called out to Sanghyeok before he remembered where they were. Sanghyeok looked completely soaked through, water dripping from his hair and his jacket clinging to his body. For some reason he was no longer wearing his cap or holding his umbrella. Jihoon pushed his way through the crowd towards Sanghyeok and reached out to grab his arm.

Sanghyeok whipped his head around in surprise, the panic in his eyes quickly fading when he locked eyes with Jihoon. Jihoon tugged on Sanghyeok's arm, "Come on hyung, let's get you back to the room."

"Right." Sanghyeok stuck close to Jihoon as they made their way through the crowd. With only his mask and hood to hide his face now, Sanghyeok leaned towards Jihoon until he was practically using Jihoon as a shield. One hand clung nervously to the front of Jihoon's shirt and Jihoon felt a rush of protectiveness. He wrapped one arm around Sanghyeok's shoulders and pushed through the crowd with a renewed determination. Sanghyeok looked alarmed when Jihoon led them towards the elevator but didn't fight against his grip. As soon as they were through the doors, Jihoon pulled Sanghyeok against his chest to obscure his face. Jihoon could feel Sanghyeok shivering in his arms and he glared in annoyance at the people

continuing to pile into the elevator. The last person stepped inside and the doors finally closed with a cheerful *ding* .

Jihoon readjusted his hood to better cover his face. If he got recognized then all the effort to keep Sanghyeok hidden would be for nothing. In fact, it would probably spawn even more rumors if they were spotted together like this. With Sanghyeok shivering in his arms, it felt like an eternity before they reached their floor. By the time they made it back to the room Sanghyeok was shivering so violently that he could hardly walk straight.

“Hyung, are you okay?” Jihoon fretted, “I’ll turn the heating up. Do you want to go change? Or take a hot shower? I can start the water.”

Now that they were safely inside, Jihoon could get a better look at Sanghyeok’s condition. He looked paler than normal and his lips were a sickly shade of blue. His clothing was still dripping water all over the carpet, clinging to his body in a way that made him look thinner than ever. If it weren’t for the concern clouding his mind, Sanghyeok would’ve reminded Jihoon of a waterlogged cat. Adorably scruffy and vulnerable without the illusion of size given by its thick fur.

“I-I’m f-f-fine. J-just n-n-need-” Sanghyeok gestured at his suitcase, giving up on forcing words through his chattering teeth.

“Of course.” Jihoon immediately rushed to grab a new set of clothes out of Sanghyeok’s bag. “I’ll get you a towel too, okay?

Jihoon ran to the bathroom and grabbed the entire stack of luxurious looking white towels from the cabinet. Running on autopilot, Jihoon draped one towel over Sanghyeok’s head and started drying off his hair. Sanghyeok struggled with the buttons on his jacket, hands shaking too much to undo them. Jihoon gently pushed Sanghyeok’s hands away and began to undo the buttons one by one. He wrestled the wet jacket off of Sanghyeok and got to work pulling the similarly soaked sweater over Sanghyeok’s head. It wasn’t until Sanghyeok was only wearing a thin cotton t-shirt that Jihoon felt the embarrassment hit him. He jerked his hands away and threw the remaining towels at Sanghyeok. “I’ll go find more.” He mumbled before escaping to the bathroom.

He slammed the door behind him and groaned. In the moment he didn't even think about it, but the realization that he was undressing Sanghyeok in a hotel room was hitting him like a truck now. Jihoon thunked his head against the door as if it would knock the memory out of his head. He should've just helped undo the buttons and then minded his own business after that. No, he didn't do anything wrong did he? With how much Sanghyeok was shaking, it would've taken him forever to undress himself, especially with how cumbersome wet clothing was to remove. Jihoon helping only meant Sanghyeok could change into warm and dry clothing even faster. Sanghyeok would understand that.

A soft knock on the door broke his train of thought. "I'm done." Sanghyeok called, voice only trembling a little now.

Jihoon opened the door and smiled, hoping he didn't look as flustered as he felt. "How are you feeling?" Jihoon asked. Sanghyeok was dressed in a cozy looking sweatshirt along with sweatpants, the fluffy towel hanging around his neck to catch any drops of water falling from his damp hair. He still looked far too pale.

"I f-feel good now." Sanghyeok said, words clumsy in his mouth.

Jihoon crossed his arms and pouted, "You're lying."

"I feel b-better now." Sanghyeok corrected, trying to smile through the stiffness of his cheeks. The result looked more like a grimace than anything.

"Sit down, I'll reheat the food." Jihoon moved swiftly to put Sanghyeok's food back in the microwave just to make sure it was extra hot. While the food heated up, he grabbed the blanket from the bed and draped it around Sanghyeok. He checked the thermostat on his way back to the microwave, frowning to see that the temperature barely went up.

A crestfallen look fell across Sanghyeok's face when Jihoon set the bowl of stew in front of him. Panic immediately made Jihoon freeze. Did he do something wrong? Was something wrong with the food? Maybe Sanghyeok was allergic to something?

“I forgot to bring something for dessert.” Sanghyeok said. The look of distress on his face was far too sincere for the inconsequential contents of his apology.

Relief flooded through Jihoon and he slumped into the chair next to Sanghyeok, “Don’t do that to me hyung. It’s bad for my heart.”

Sanghyeok blinked, tilting his head, “Pardon?”

“That sad expression,” Jihoon mumbled, “I thought you hated the food or something. Don’t make expressions like that.”

“But I forgot to bring dessert.” Sanghyeok said, looking genuinely saddened.

“Hyung, you came in soaked to the skin and freezing to death. Do you really think I care that you forgot to stop for sweets?” Jihoon raised an eyebrow.

Sanghyeok laughed. The sound was hoarse. “You make it sound worse than it was. I was just stuck in the rain for a little bit. I’m not going to freeze to death from that.”

Jihoon hesitated, would it be annoying if he kept fretting over Sanghyeok? Even now, he could see Sanghyeok’s hand shaking while he carefully lifted the spoon to his mouth. Sanghyeok insisted he was fine, would it really be okay for Jihoon to continue pushing the topic? At least he was dressed in dry clothes and eating something warm now. Jihoon would probably come off as overbearing if he kept pushing the matter. He sighed and began to eat his own food. Sanghyeok seemed to pick up on Jihoon’s change in mood quickly.

“What did you do today?” Sanghyeok asked conversationally. His tone was cheerful even as his voice trembled from the residual cold in his body.

“I walked around the hotel and browsed the shops they have. It’s a pretty large place.” Jihoon said, “They have a lot of silly touristy things.”

“Should we get some? Maybe we can be silly tourists too.” Sanghyeok suggested. Jihoon’s head snapped up to meet Sanghyeok’s gaze. Sanghyeok’s eyes twinkled playfully and a small smile sat on his lips, “Anything catch your eye? ”

Jihoon looked down at his food and pretended to be interested in it. He wasn’t sure why Sanghyeok’s attention suddenly made him feel nervous, or why the suggestion that they pretend they’re on vacation together made his cheeks warm. “I don’t remember.” Jihoon mumbled, “We can go down together and look later?”

“Sounds good. I know it’s not ideal that we’re stuck here, but treating it like a vacation makes it feel almost exciting.” Sanghyeok mused, “Even if it was raining all day, the city was still quite beautiful.”

Jihoon felt a twinge of regret. He should’ve gone with Sanghyeok. Why did he sit around in the hotel looking for someone he didn’t even want to find anyway? Ever since he got here, the happiest moments were those evenings where he ate dinner with Sanghyeok and talked about mundane things. Jihoon felt happy in his dreams too, while they lasted. But the dreams weren’t real life. In the end, they did nothing but convince him to continue with his miserable search day after day. Those dreams…..why should they be important? Why did society condition him to believe that it was worth it with all those love stories and fairy tales? Why should Jihoon choose the illusion and promise of happiness over being happy right now? Maybe he shouldn’t. Maybe he didn’t need to. Maybe he could just choose ordinary happiness. And maybe that was okay.

“Hyung, let’s go somewhere tomorrow.” Jihoon blurted.

Sanghyeok looked startled, eyes widening in a way that made Jihoon’s heart skip a beat. “Where?”

“Anywhere. Let’s go sightseeing. Let’s dress like ridiculous tourists and take a photo in front of a famous monument. Let’s do something fun.” Jihoon felt a weight lift from his chest as he spoke, “I’m tired of trapping myself like this.”

“We’ll have to see what the weather's like tomorrow.” Sanghyeok pointed out.

“Right.” Jihoon looked down in embarrassment. He definitely got way too ahead of himself in his excitement. “If it isn’t raining tomorrow then we can go somewhere.”

“Well, as long as it isn’t flooding outside it’s nothing a couple umbrellas and a raincoat won’t be able to fix.” Sanghyeok amended, smiling, “The rain doesn’t matter that much. We can go wherever you want Jihoon-ah.”

Jihoon’s cheeks felt warm. He wasn’t sure if it was from the warmth of Sanghyeok’s fond smile or the embarrassment of not actually having a plan for tomorrow. “I, uh, I was actually hoping you would choose the location,” Jihoon admitted.

“Me?” Sanghyeok looked confused, “We’re trying to make this feel like a fun vacation for you right? I would feel awful if I chose a place and you ended up as miserable as you were sitting in this hotel room.”

“Uh….” Jihoon winced. He couldn’t really tell Sanghyeok that the “fun” he was referring to was simply spending time together, not actually the sightseeing part. Going outside was just the first method of spending time together that Jihoon thought of. “I just don’t really know what’s around here.” Jihoon said, “I’ll be happy going anywhere that’s not in the hotel.”

Sanghyeok looked skeptical, “I want to make sure it’s something you actually want to do.”

“Hyung, I think you could take me for a walk in the supermarket and I’d be happy,” Jihoon said with more honesty than he intended, “I’ll be happy with any location you choose.”

“We’ll look at a list of locations together.” Sanghyeok insisted.

“Sure.” Jihoon agreed, fully intending to just agree with whichever destination Sanghyeok looked most interested in. If Sanghyeok wanted the illusion of collaboration however, Jihoon was happy to comply.

The expression on Sanghyeok's face radiated so much genuine joy that Jihoon's heart ached. Did it really make Sanghyeok that happy that Jihoon agreed to go sightseeing with him? It seemed so. Sanghyeok was practically glowing as he dug into his food. His cheeks were a rosy cream color, courtesy of the spicy soup and thick blanket. His lips were stained cherry red from chili oil and the lighting in the room was angled perfectly to cast a glow around the outline of Sanghyeok's face. The edges of his face shimmered like gold. With the way the light shone from behind him, even his eyelashes were visible. There was a certain surrealistic quality to the sight, like Sanghyeok's very existence challenged reality itself. He was so beautiful it was unreal. Happiness looked good on him.

Was it Jihoon that made him happy?

Sanghyeok didn't seem to notice Jihoon's staring, continuing to stuff his cheeks full of food. Each time Jihoon was sure Sanghyeok would chew and swallow, Sanghyeok spooned yet another bite of food into his mouth. It wasn't until his cheeks ballooned out to the size of a ping pong ball that Sanghyeok finally swallowed with a content look on his face. He must really like the food. Jihoon looked down at his own food with a conflicted smile. It must've been the food making Sanghyeok smile like that. Good food would make anyone happy. As long as Sanghyeok was happy, it didn't matter what the source of the happiness was, regardless of how much Jihoon unconsciously hoped he could be the one putting that smile on Sanghyeok's face.

This was enough.

Jihoon gazed softly at Sanghyeok as he started to stuff his cheeks full of food again. The more he stared, the more desperately he prayed that his soulmate wouldn't show up in his dreams again that night. If only he could forget about the angel haunting his dreams, this simple, ordinary happiness would be enough for him.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update asfdg,jk I forget that writing more words means editing more words (plus work has been busy)

It's always my favorite time of week when I get to log in and read all the comments before uploading the new chapter, I always save it for the end of my work week to start

my weekend off right c:

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cold hands touched his neck. Jihoon squeaked inelegantly and jerked back. The hands chased him, followed by a head of fluffy hair.

“I’m cold.”

The words were mumbled into Jihoon’s neck. Jihoon sighed and pulled the person closer with a fond smile, cold hands and all. The person snuggled closer, hands clinging to Jihoon’s shirt and face tucked into the crook of his neck. Jihoon pulled the blankets tighter around the two of them and rubbed the person’s back comfortingly. His breath was warm against Jihoon’s neck and the cold of his hands only just seeped through Jihoon’s thin cotton shirt.

“You’re warm.” The person murmured. Jihoon tried his best not to flinch at the way soft lips brushed against his neck as the person in his arms spoke. It sent shivers down his spine.

“Do you want me to get more blankets?” Jihoon offered.

“No. I like this better.”

Jihoon rested his chin on top of their head and closed his eyes. A peaceful lull fell over him. He could feel every breath the man in his arms took. The longer they laid there together, the drowsier Jihoon got. At this proximity, it wasn’t long before heat flowed seamlessly between their bodies and their breathing synced. The warmth and comfort was so unbearably pleasant that it was almost jarring. When was the last time he’d felt so at ease? So completely and thoroughly content?

A cold shiver rippled through Jihoon’s body and his eyes flew open again. His sudden awareness made his hands clammy and he fought to stay as calm as he could. He was in a dream. He was dreaming. *Again* . Jihoon grit his teeth and clenched his fists. Of course he had to dream again. Of course the universe would force another taste of ecstasy down his

throat to ensure he endlessly tortured himself looking for someone he was terrified to actually find. But if he was already here…..

Jihoon swallowed the guilt and shame rising in his throat. If he was here anyways, wasn't it only fair that he let himself enjoy it? It was just a dream. A dream where he was guaranteed to look into his soulmate's face and feel nothing but love and bliss. A dream where Jihoon could touch an angel formed from his deepest desires and hear only the words he wanted to hear from its lips. Or he could force himself to wake up right now. If he escaped the dream now, wouldn't it make facing reality easier?

What a joke. As if that was ever a real option. As if anyone would have the self discipline to give this up. Jihoon buried his face in his soulmate's hair and breathed in his sweet and vaguely floral scent. His soulmate stirred in Jihoon's arms and mumbled something intelligible before going still again. Jihoon smiled and stroked his soulmate's hair gently. A wave of adoration filled his chest and Jihoon let himself be whisked away by the feeling. So this was what it was like to love someone so wholeheartedly and unconditionally. Jihoon moved his hand lower to caress his soulmate's cheek. His soulmate leaned into the touch and turned his head to kiss Jihoon's palm. "Go back to sleep." A sleepy voice mumbled.

The feeling of his soulmate's lips against his skin made his heart beat faster. He wanted to feel it again. Jihoon untangled himself from his soulmate's arms. Before the whines of protest could leave his soulmate's lips, Jihoon dipped down to kiss him. His soulmate was pliant in his arms and Jihoon pressed forward more aggressively than he intended to. His soulmate squirmed and gasped underneath him and Jihoon pushed away his worry about his inexperience showing. It was a dream anyway. It didn't matter. None of this mattered. None of this was real.

"Jihoon? What are you-" His soulmate broke off with a gasp as Jihoon nipped at the sensitive skin of his neck. His entire body shuddered and he moaned. A beautiful sound. A fake sound. It was fake. It was all fake.

"You're acting.....aah…..ngh….y-you're…..acting……weird…." His soulmate gasped.

"Am I?" Jihoon said, voice cold and detached. He continued to kiss down his soulmate's neck, trying to quench the agitation prickling at his skin.

“Jihoon-ah.”

He finally paused, feeling a painful throb in his chest. “What?” he snapped, swallowing the lump rising in his throat.

“Look at me.”

Jihoon didn’t move, his body trembling as he stared blankly at the marks littered across his soulmate’s skin. Even knowing he was the one that left them, he didn’t have it in him to feel happy about it this time.

“Jihoon.” Gentle hands moved to cradle Jihoon’s face, “What’s wrong? You know that you can talk to me about anything right?”

“Yeah.” Jihoon mumbled, throat dry.

“Look at me.”

This time Jihoon’s body moved without his permission. Pulling back, Jihoon found himself face to face with Sanghyeok.

“AH!” Jihoon sat up, heart pounding so loud he was sure it would beat straight out of his chest. Jihoon looked around frantically, confusion and panic making his head hurt. The adrenaline coursing through his body subsided when he realized he was in his hotel room. Frazzled memories flooded back into his head and Jihoon almost laughed out loud. He wasn’t even sure if he should feel relieved that he didn’t dream about his soulmate or mortified that he dreamt about Sanghyeok of all people. Jihoon groaned and buried his face in his hands at the memory of what he did in his dream. How was he supposed to look Sanghyeok in the eyes after that?

Jihoon shook off the embarrassment. It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t like he *knew* the person was Sanghyeok when he decided to do…..… *that* . It wasn’t like he could control who showed up

in his dreams either. It was just an unfortunate accident that he had that sort of dream about Sanghyeok. That's all. More importantly…….

Jihoon let out a relieved laugh and flopped back onto the bed. No soulmate dream. He was free. He was no longer plagued by the shadow of a person that didn't even exist. He no longer had to battle the temptation to continue his desperate and hopeless search. It felt like, night after night, his dreams flaunted paradise in his face. A paradise so impossibly beautiful that, day by day, Jihoon made himself miserable searching for a flower in a field of weeds. But the cycle was over now. Without the remnants of a dream to convince Jihoon to just try *one more time* , he could finally do something else with his day. Free from the clutches of his dreams, maybe he could forget about paradise and just indulge in ordinary, middling joys in life.

Like sightseeing.

Jihoon turned around to check if Sanghyeok was awake only to find the bed empty. Jihoon frowned and got up to check the bathroom. Empty. He gnawed at his lip and checked his phone in case Sanghyeok left a message. Nothing. Maybe he was downstairs? Or out getting breakfast? Would it be overkill to ask Minseok for Sanghyeok's location again?

No. He was being stupid. He could just call or message Sanghyeok like a normal person. Jihoon was oddly disgruntled about being left behind though, even if he was sure Sanghyeok was just too polite to wake him. Maybe that made it worse. Jihoon didn't want Sanghyeok to be polite towards him. The sound of the door unlocking made Jihoon jump out of bed. He barely had the time to straighten out his hair and clothes before Sanghyeok was walking through the door.

"You're awake." Sanghyeok's smile was so bright that Jihoon forgot about his sulking for a moment. "I went out and got some bread from a nearby bakery. I also bought us raincoats for today if you still wanted to go somewhere."

Jihoon pouted but took the bread Sanghyeok offered anyway, "Why didn't you wake me up? I could've gone with you."

Sanghyeok's smile fell, "Do you not like what I picked out?" He dumped the other packages of bread onto the table, and pushed them towards Jihoon, "I have a chocolate bread too. And

custard, green onion, ham and cheese, pork floss-”

“Hyung!” Jihoon interrupted, biting back a laugh, “That wasn’t what I meant. I just wanted to go with you. I was worried when I woke up and you were gone.”

“Oh.” Sanghyeok looked equal parts embarrassed and flattered, “My apologies. Next time I’ll leave a message.”

“Next time you’ll wake me up so I can come with you.” Jihoon corrected, unwrapping his bread and taking a bite. “Thanks for the food hyung, it’s delicious.”

“Ah, I’m glad,” Sanghyeok fumbled to open his own piece of bread, ears red. He was cute when he was flustered.

“How was the weather?” Jihoon asked, glancing over the still wet raincoat Sanghyeok hung on the chair.

“It’s raining but not too hard,” Sanghyeok said, “The weather is tame enough if you still want to go out and do something.”

“Of course.” Jihoon said immediately, “Where did you want to go first?”

“The markets are more lively later in the day,” Sanghyeok noted, “So we can go there last. Did you want to go to the botanical gardens? I’m afraid the parks might be too muddy in this weather.”

“That sounds good to me.” Jihoon agreed.

They packed a bag full of the remaining baked goods plus a water bottle, a portable charger, and an extra umbrella. Five minutes of whining and two minutes of guilt tripping later, Jihoon happily carried both the backpack and the umbrella as he followed Sanghyeok out of

the building like an obedient puppy. It was a win-win really, Jihoon got to carry everything for Sanghyeok *and* his hands were too occupied for him to be in charge of navigating. Last thing he wanted to do was lead them in the wrong direction.

Sanghyeok had his eyes glued to the map on his phone as they walked down the street. Jihoon took care to hold the umbrella directly above Sanghyeok at the expense of his own left shoulder. He had a raincoat on anyway, a little rain on his arm wouldn't hurt. Jihoon gently steered Sanghyeok clear of any obstacles while Sanghyeok figured out the route they were taking. Either Sanghyeok had wholehearted trust in Jihoon to keep him from crashing into a pole or he was just so reckless he didn't care to watch where he was going.

"I got it." Sanghyeok said finally, "It's a 20 minute walk, which is likely more efficient than calling a cab considering the traffic." Sanghyeok glanced up at Jihoon, "Are you okay with walking?"

"Y-Yeah." Jihoon suddenly felt nervous. The way Sanghyeok tilted his head upwards to look at Jihoon advertised their close proximity in a way that made Jihoon's heart beat faster. Sanghyeok's eyes lost their sharpness when he looked up like this, rounding into a full almond shape that perfectly showcased the tapioca ball-esque center of his eye. Jihoon looked away, heart fluttering like an overheated computer, "Walking is fine."

What was wrong with him? He had no reason to be so nervous around Sanghyeok. It wasn't even an exaggeration to say that he hadn't gone a single day without seeing Sanghyeok's face ever since he set foot in the esports scene, there was no reason he should be intimidated by Sanghyeok's presence now. He had nothing to be scared of. Jihoon took a deep breath and willed his heart to calm down, he had the rare opportunity to become closer friends with Sanghyeok, he didn't want to mess it up. Maybe that was why he was so nervous?

"Look at the water."

"Huh?" Jihoon resurfaced from his thoughts to find that they were walking across a bridge. A wide expanse of water stretched out underneath the bridge, the surface dappled by the endless flurry of raindrops. Jihoon smiled, "It's pretty."

Jihoon heard something that sounded like a muffled laugh and turned to confirm that Sanghyeok was indeed trying his best not to laugh out loud. Jihoon pouted, "What are you

laughing at me for?”

Sanghyeok laughed again, letting the sound flow freely this time. Warmth and amusement glittered in his eyes as he looked up at Jihoon again, “You finally smiled.”

Jihoon blinked in confusion, his sulking forgotten, “What?”

Sanghyeok turned to stare out at the water again, “Isn’t it funny? Humans have developed complex societies along with more and more reasons to distance ourselves from each other. Even so, I’ve yet to find a person that isn’t struck with a little bit of joy when they see a body of water. Despite all our differences, whether they’re real or manufactured, we all still smile when we encounter these simple, primal joys. The first sunny day in spring, the yellowing of leaves in autumn, the first snow in winter…”

Jihoon found his gaze glued to the thoughtful expression on Sanghyeok’s face. He really could listen to Sanghyeok talk forever. “I don’t think I’m qualified to say whether you’re right or not,” Jihoon said, “But you did get me to smile by pointing out the lake, so maybe you’re onto something.”

Sanghyeok cast a brief glance in Jihoon’s direction and Jihoon tried his best to pretend he hadn’t been staring. “It just seemed like you were concerned about something.” Sanghyeok said, “You were frowning.”

“Was I frowning?” Jihoon feigned cluelessness, “I didn’t realize. I wasn’t actually thinking about anything important.”

Sanghyeok looked unconvinced, “We can head back if there’s something you need to do.”

“No!” Jihoon protested immediately, “I was just worried today would go wrong somehow. I thought it would sound ridiculous so I didn’t say it.”

“Not at all.” Sanghyeok said. A small smile graced his lips and he turned his head away from Jihoon, either to hide his embarrassment or to get a better look at the lake. “If I’m being honest, I was a little worried as well. You seemed down the past few days, being stranded here and all. I wanted to plan something that would cheer you up.”

For some reason, a painful ache bloomed in Jihoon’s chest at Sanghyeok’s words. A mixture of panic and frustration seeped through his veins the longer he let the silence sit, but he wasn’t even sure what he wanted to say.

“Hyung.” Jihoon blurted.

Sanghyeok turned to look at him, “Hm?”

“Don’t say things like that.” Jihoon mumbled.

Sanghyeok looked confused, “Things like what?”

Jihoon flushed with a mix of embarrassment and frustration. He didn’t have a plan when he spoke, he just knew that something about the situation didn’t sit right with him. “I’ve been really happy, spending time here with you like this.” Jihoon said finally, deciding to let honesty take the reins, “Whenever my mood is sour, it’s not because I’m stranded here. It has nothing to do with that at all. It’s just a problem I’ve been having for years that I was reminded of.”

“I see. It just seemed like, since you left Chengdu ahead of your teammates, that you were in a rush to return to Korea. With that in mind I just assumed that your frustrations were because your trip home was interrupted. I’m sorry for making assumptions, I didn’t mean to upset you.” Sanghyeok said sincerely.

“Well now I feel bad for making it seem like a big deal,” Jihoon grumbled, pushing down the guilt that surfaced in response to Sanghyeok’s all too sincere apology, “I just wanted you to know that I’m glad we get to spend time together outside of competitions.”

“I’m glad too. As much as I enjoy playing against you on stage.”

“Playing on the same team is more fun,” Jihoon said with a smile, “Remember last year? You’re definitely one of the best junglers I’ve played with. Top 10 at least.”

Sanghyeok wrinkled his nose, “I forgot to take smite.”

“You stole an objective against a team of junglers,” Jihoon reminded.

“That was a fluke.”

Jihoon once again found himself staring. Sanghyeok was cute when he wrinkled his nose like that. Jihoon looked away before he could get caught staring this time, “You’ll choose me again this year right?”

“I can’t be sure I’ll even be the captain.”

Jihoon snorted, “Are you kidding? Who else would be the midlane representative?”

“I suppose,” Sanghyeok conceded, “The other teams would be crazy to let me have you though.”

“Pick me anyway, I promise we’ll win this time.”

Sanghyeok looked amused, “That’s exactly why I think the other teams will make sure I can’t choose you.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Jihoon said with a shrug, “If you just smile and ask them nicely I bet they would cave instantly.”

Sanghyeok tipped his head, “Why would you think that?”

“Because- well, you know,” Jihoon gestured vaguely like it would explain it, but Sanghyeok only looked more confused. “It’s just- who’s going to say no to you? There’s not a soul in the LCK that could say no if you look them in the eye and ask for something.”

“My teammates-”

“They don’t count,” Jihoon interrupted, “Every other player would fold instantly if you looked them in the eye and asked nicely. You probably don’t even need to ask nicely.”

“What about you?”

Jihoon’s instinct was to give a nonchalant and joking response, but the half curious half playful look on Sanghyeok’s face made him freeze. The corners of his lips were curled upwards ever so slightly, the expressiveness of that action magnified tenfold by the natural curve of Sanghyeok’s mouth. Looking at Sanghyeok now, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to be a little bit of a pushover. Jihoon looked away, “I said what I said.” He mumbled, “How long until we get there?”

“2 minutes.” Sanghyeok said. Despite his voice overflowing with amusement, he let Jihoon change the subject.

Thanks to the rain, the entire garden was completely deserted. Intricately laid cobblestone paths led them through lush rose bushes into an expanse of jasmine shrubs. The fragrance was dulled by the rain, but still sweet. The path continued into arrangements of icy blue flowers with delicate petals. Sanghyeok stooped down to pick up a flower that had fallen and offered it to Jihoon.

“Hold it and I’ll take a photo?”

“Yeah.” Jihoon’s eyes were glued to the little blossom he held in his palm, “Of course.”

“I’ll hold the umbrella for you. Crouch down so that the flowers are in the background. Lower. A little to the left. Hold the flower in front of you and smile.” Sanghyeok instructed. He paused and snapped a few pictures. “Now put the flower in your hair. Smile again. Turn your head a little so I can see the flower better. Pull down your hood.”

Jihoon stayed as still as possible and let Sanghyeok take as many photos as he wanted to. Finally satisfied with the photos he took, Sanghyeok stood up and stared at his phone thoughtfully. Jihoon took the umbrella back and peered over Sanghyeok’s shoulder to look at the photos. Sanghyeok really did have a talent for photo taking. Jihoon wondered how Sanghyeok could take photos that looked like professional shots yet still be incapable of taking selfies from a flattering angle. Jihoon carefully plucked the flower out of his hair and slipped it into his pocket. He wasn’t fully sure why he did it, but it didn’t feel right to throw it away. They kept walking until they reached a large pond. A wooden bridge arched over the water, leading to a cozy looking gazebo in the center.

“It’s a turtle!” Sanghyeok tugged excitedly on Jihoon’s sleeve. Jihoon looked over to see an impressively large turtle sitting on the edge of the pond. Jihoon made sure to keep the umbrella steadily over Sanghyeok’s head as he carefully approached the turtle to take a photo. As they got closer to the pond, Jihoon spotted movement flickering just under the lily pads.

“Koi fish!” Jihoon exclaimed.

“They’re so large.” Sanghyeok said in wonder, “Even knowing how big they get, it’s so different seeing it in person. So many different colors too. Look, that one’s golden.”

“And that one’s black and red.” Jihoon said, pointing at another koi fish nearby.

“I think this one is just a normal fish. A catfish maybe?”

“Want to go across the bridge?” Jihoon suggested once Sanghyeok had time to take a photo of every unique koi fish pattern he saw, “We can sit down for a bit.”

“Sure.” Sanghyeok agreed, “This garden is surprisingly spacious. I’m a little tired from all the walking.”

Thankfully the benches inside the gazebo were dry. They sat down and Sanghyeok gestured for Jihoon to take off the backpack. He dumped out the remaining baked goods from breakfast and looked up at Jihoon expectantly.

“You pick first.” Jihoon insisted. Sanghyeok rolled his eyes but picked up a piece of bread without protesting.

“This is almost like a picnic.” Sanghyeok commented, biting into his bread.

“Do you like picnics? We can go on one.” Jihoon offered immediately.

Sanghyeok laughed, “That wasn’t me secretly hinting that we should do that. I don’t think the weather would be very good for a picnic.”

“Another time then.” Jihoon said, “When we’re back in Korea maybe.”

“Yeah?” Sanghyeok looked at Jihoon with hopeful eyes.

“Yeah.” Jihoon felt a pang in his chest. He didn’t want to give this up. For some reason, the more time he spent with Sanghyeok, the more and more he craved Sanghyeok’s presence. He didn’t want to go back to before, when the only time Sanghyeok looked him in the eye like this was when they met on stage. “Hyung. When we go back to Korea, can we do this again?”

The tentative hopefulness still lurked in Sanghyeok’s expression, “Do what again?”

“Hang out. Just the two of us. I can finally treat you to dinner, and we can go on a picnic when the sun is out and the weather is nice.”

Sanghyeok looked down and smiled, “That would be nice.”

“Promise?” Jihoon held out his pinky with a cheeky smile.

Sanghyeok laughed but obligingly hooked his pinky with Jihoon’s, “I promise.”

“Your hand is cold.” Jihoon frowned disapprovingly and cupped Sanghyeok’s hand between his own.

“My hands are always cold.” Sanghyeok tried to withdraw his hand but Jihoon stubbornly held onto it.

“Give me your other hand.”

“I’m fine.

“If you’re fine then let me check.” Jihoon reached over in an attempt to grab Sanghyeok’s other hand, but Sanghyeok snatched it out of reach before he could catch it.

“Too slow.” Sanghyeok teased, a playful glimmer in his eyes.

Jihoon raised an eyebrow, his competitive side activating, “Oh really? You don’t win this fight hyung.”

Jihoon tightened his grip on the hand he was already holding and yanked Sanghyeok towards him. Sanghyeok fell forward with an indignant yelp and crashed face first into Jihoon’s chest.

Jihoon easily captured Sanghyeok's other hand and smirked triumphantly. Sanghyeok snapped his head up to look at Jihoon, almost knocking the top of his head against Jihoon's chin in the process. "That wasn't fair."

Jihoon tilted his head downwards to meet Sanghyeok's sulky gaze. They were so close that their foreheads almost touched. Jihoon clasped his hands tighter around Sanghyeok's as if he could force warmth into them by doing so. He leaned forward slightly, bumping their foreheads gently together, "It seems fair to me."

"You're-" Sanghyeok's mouth opened and closed but no other words came out. He stared up at Jihoon with a half panicked expression. His cheeks were flushed a rosy pink color and his ears bright red. It was cute. The more he stared, the faster his heart beat. It felt just like earlier, like he was nervous. Was he intimidated? Scared? No. This didn't feel like fear. What else would make his heart beat so quickly and trepidatiously? It felt almost like the feeling he got when he walked onto stage to hear the crowd cheering his name. A mix of anxiety and euphoria. But why would he be feeling that right now?

"You're so cute." Jihoon breathed, his mouth voicing his unconscious thoughts while his rational mind was preoccupied with interpreting the emotions swimming through his head.

Sanghyeok's eyes widened, "What?"

Their faces were so close that Jihoon could see the way Sanghyeok's eyelashes quivered and the miniscule movement of his pupils as his eyes darted from Jihoon's eyes to his nose to his lips. Jihoon's eyes drifted down to Sanghyeok's lips too. They were still slightly parted from surprise and, despite the cold, they were still a soft pink color. Was he wearing lip color of some sort? Why would he do that if he was only planning to see Jihoon today. Either way, the color on his lips looked nice. Jihoon wanted to touch them just to check if they were as soft as they looked, but if he let go of Sanghyeok's hands then he would move away.

So he settled for staring. He stared at Sanghyeok's elegant eyes and sharp cheekbones. He had the face shape one would find on statues of Greek gods and lips one would see painted onto angelic cherubs. His pale skin, at this proximity, was littered with the ghost of scars and blemishes. Somehow, those imperfections only made him more beautiful. Seeing his face up close, textures and all, Jihoon could almost believe Sanghyeok was carved from stone.

“Jihoon, what-”

Jihoon leaned forward again, pressing their foreheads together. “Just let me warm you up.”

He squeezed Sanghyeok’s hands again and they finally relaxed. Jihoon cradled Sanghyeok’s hands against his chest and felt Sanghyeok curl his fingers tentatively into Jihoon’s shirt. The cold from Sanghyeok’s hands seeped through his shirt but Jihoon couldn’t care less. If anything, it reminded Jihoon vaguely of the dream he had last night. It was still embarrassing to think about, but it was also……nice? If the way he felt right now had anything to say about it, the dream was definitely a nice one.

Jihoon felt his heart skip a beat. It was such a contrast from his soulmate dreams. Those dreams may have been full of heart wrenching euphoria, but the moment he woke up those feelings turned into disappointment and bitterness. But with Sanghyeok it was different. It wasn’t just happiness manufactured by his unconscious brain. He was here, awake and alert, feeling the same bliss he felt in the dream. It was a thought that had never occurred to him, comparing Sanghyeok to his soulmate. Yet…..why couldn’t he? He didn’t want to settle for his soulmate simply because he was his soulmate, but he also didn’t want to settle for someone that wasn’t his soulmate at all.

Wasn’t Sanghyeok the solution to that problem? If there was a world where Jihoon could have Sanghyeok, it wouldn’t even be in the realm of human logic to call that settling for something less, soulmate or not. If there was a human that could shine brighter than an angel, wouldn’t Sanghyeok be the one? With the way Sanghyeok was staring at Jihoon right now, wasn’t it a possibility that this fantasy of his wasn’t so far fetched?

Jihoon’s eyes drifted down to Sanghyeok’s lips again. He leaned closer. Sanghyeok didn’t move. He released Sanghyeok’s hands and moved to cup his face instead. Sanghyeok didn’t pull away. Jihoon leaned closer. Sanghyeok closed his eyes.

Jihoon dropped his hands and jerked back. What was he doing? Was he really about to kiss Sanghyeok? What was wrong with him? Where did that come from? It wasn’t like him to do something so impulsive. His mind raced as he tried to think of a way to talk himself out of the situation.

“Sorry hyung, you just looked cold. Why don’t we find shelter somewh-”

Jihoon felt his heart stop when he glanced back to see an expression he could only describe as heartbreak on Sanghyeok's face. The expression melted into indifference at a speed that felt like a bullet to Jihoon's heart. "Yeah. Let's go somewhere else." Sanghyeok said briskly, picking up the umbrella and beginning to walk away.

"Hyung, wait-"

"Oh, you wanted to hold the umbrella?" Sanghyeok offered it to Jihoon with a forcefully amused smile, "You're stubborn about the strangest things."

Jihoon was too dumbfounded to speak, wordlessly taking the umbrella from Sanghyeok. The sudden switch in behavior was giving him whiplash. Sanghyeok was acting exactly the same as he was before, so why did it feel so anxiety inducing now? The harsh pattering of the rain didn't help. The light drizzle from before quickly swelled into a downpour as they retraced their steps back to the entrance of the garden. A shadow fell over them and Jihoon looked up to see gray clouds crawling across the sky. Jihoon didn't have time to further contemplate what just transpired between him and Sanghyeok before thunder boomed in the distance and lightning laced through the sky.

They were going to be caught in a storm.

Chapter End Notes

Enjoy~~~ Hoping to be more consistent with weekly updates from now on! (once I hit emerald in tft)

As always, any and every comment warms my heart and makes me smile like an idiot. I love how every comment is venting their frustration at poor Jihoonie. Don't worry, you guys will get to vent your frustrations at our Hyeokie once his pov starts coming out c:

Sanghyeok pov should be next next chapter if I follow my(very tentative) plan 😅

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was like the universe was punishing them. By the time they made it out of the garden the entire sidewalk looked like a shallow lake, and by the time they made it back into the city, the harsh winds mangled both umbrellas they brought with them. Sanghyeok clung to Jihoon's side as they fought their way through the storm. The downpour was so heavy that Sanghyeok's glasses were rendered practically useless. Even as someone that didn't need glasses, Jihoon could barely see through the torrent of falling water. He coiled one arm around Sanghyeok's waist to guide him as they continued to walk.

"Hyung, are you okay?" Jihoon shouted through the sound of droplets pelleting the ground.

"I'm fine!" Sanghyeok shouted back. He stumbled almost immediately after responding, Jihoon's grip around his waist the only thing keeping him from falling face first into the giant puddle that the sidewalk had become. The water was almost at their ankles now. Jihoon could feel Sanghyeok shivering; Between the heavy wind and the flooding, the raincoats they wore weren't doing very much to protect them.

"Which way?" Jihoon shouted.

"Left!"

Jihoon steered them both around the corner and was relieved to see a familiar building. "Hold on just a little longer hyung, we'll be back soon." Jihoon dragged Sanghyeok determinedly through the crowded streets. The entire sidewalk was swarming with people, none of them giving any thought to basic decorum in their rush to find shelter. Jihoon stumbled as yet another person pushed roughly past him. Sanghyeok jerked back awkwardly to avoid being hit by the edge of someone's umbrella. Jihoon grit his teeth and pulled Sanghyeok closer to him.

"Stay close to me hyung," Jihoon shielded Sanghyeok with his own body and shouldered his way through the crowd. Sanghyeok gave up on his glasses and shoved them into his pocket, trusting Jihoon to keep him on his feet. Without fear of knocking Sanghyeok's glasses off

now, Jihoon picked up the pace, shoving his way through the sea of moving bodies. It wasn't until they got to the end of the street that the crowd began to thin out. Jihoon spotted the hotel in the distance and smiled despite their situation.

"We're almost there!"

"T-That-s….g-go-good-d."

Jihoon glanced down at Sanghyeok in alarm. He was shivering violently now, footsteps as unsteady as his voice as he struggled to keep pace with Jihoon. Jihoon ignored the panic rising in his chest and kept moving forward. Once they made it inside it would be warm, and Sanghyeok would be okay. Jihoon's arm ached from his effort to carry as much of Sanghyeok's weight as possible. Between panic and worry swirling through his head, he made a mental note that he should really start taking the gym more seriously.

They stumbled through the front door and hobbled past a tired looking janitor. The janitor glanced morosely down at the trail of water Jihoon and Sanghyeok tracked through the door and Jihoon mumbled out a quick apology. The hotel must've been stricter about only letting residents in this time, because the lobby was surprisingly empty and they made it to the elevator with no trouble at all.

"Almost there hyung." Jihoon soothed.

Sanghyeok's face twitched like he was trying to smile, "Y-You a-act l-l-like I'm d-dy-dying. I-I'm f-f-fine.."

"You're not fine." Jihoon huffed, "It would be a miracle if you come out of this without hypothermia."

As soon as they got into the hotel room Jihoon shoved Sanghyeok towards the bathroom, "You shower first, take as long as you need to warm up. I'll be fine as soon as I change into dry clothes."

Sanghyeok stumbled towards the bathroom and Jihoon wondered briefly if he would be okay by himself. He shook off the thought, it wasn't like he could offer to help Sanghyeok shower. Especially after…Jihoon groaned out loud and buried his head in his hands. Something was definitely wrong with him. Jihoon tried his best to think about *anything else* aside from the stunt he pulled earlier today. Focusing on something more practical, he peeled off his wet clothes and pulled on as many layers as he could feasibly fit onto his body. The task may have kept his hands busy but it still gave his mind free reign to wander.

What the heck possessed him to act that way earlier?

Sure, Sanghyeok was pretty. That was just a fact. Jihoon already knew that. It was completely normal to think that way. And then his willingness to date Sanghyeok if it was a possibility? That was also normal. Probably. Jihoon was 99% sure not a single person in the LCK would say no to that. It wasn't like Jihoon didn't know these things about himself, so why was he acting out now?

It was that goddamn dream, it was putting ideas into his head. Yet…….

What a nice dream it was.

Jihoon pulled the blankets around himself and hummed thoughtfully. Did he really want Sanghyeok? Or did he only feel that way because of his dream? The answer to that one was easy. If his dreams could completely alter the way he thought while awake, he would still be obsessing over his soulmate. These feelings he had for Sanghyeok, they were real. If anything, being with Sanghyeok in the light of reality was even better than in his dreams. Even the brain numbing joy forcefully injected into his being by his soulmate dreams paled in comparison to seeing Sanghyeok's smiling face right in front of him. Jihoon couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. For the first time in his life he began to actively search for his soulmate, only to end up falling for someone else entirely.

Screw being special. Screw expectations and judgements. He didn't need to be fate's chosen one. He didn't need a picture perfect storybook romance. Although, if he somehow got Sanghyeok to like him back, wouldn't that make him special anyway? If he got Sanghyeok to return his feelings, maybe that counted as being fate's chosen one in its own way.

The sound of the door opening sent Jihoon jumping out of bed. He dragged the blankets with him and immediately swaddled Sanghyeok in them. The weight of the blankets nearly knocked Sanghyeok over and Jihoon hovered over Sanghyeok in panic. Sanghyeok looked even paler than before, skin tinged with gray and lips turning blue and purple. Jihoon bit his lip, “Hyung, are you okay? No, that’s a stupid question. Of course you’re not okay and of course you’ll answer with ‘I’m fine’ anyways.” Jihoon sighed and herded Sanghyeok towards the bed, “Lay down, I’ll turn the heating up.”

Sanghyeok sat against the headboard of the bed, head lulling to the side in a way that was too lifeless for Jihoon’s sanity. Jihoon tapped impatiently at the thermostat but the screen was completely dark. “The heating’s broken?” Jihoon groaned, distress forcing his voice up an octave, “This has to be a joke.”

He rushed back to the bed and sat tentatively next to Sanghyeok. Sanghyeok’s eyes fluttered open and his lips twitched to show his intention to smile. Jihoon felt a pang in his chest. He reached out and touched Sanghyeok’s face– his skin was cold as ice. Jihoon let out a humorless and half-crazed laugh, his chest tightening with an intensity of panic like he had never felt before.

“Was it always this hard to breathe?” He wondered out loud. Jihoon could feel his own hands starting to shake now. This pain in his chest was worse than any injury he had ever gotten. Not even close. It felt like he was rotting from inside out. He wished he could turn back time to before he suggested they leave the hotel room. If Jihoon never brought it up, maybe Sanghyeok wouldn’t have to suffer like this. It was all his fault.

Sanghyeok leaned weakly into Jihoon’s touch. “W-Warm…” he mumbled. The rush of panic faded as fast as it came; Sanghyeok was more important right now, he could drown himself in his worries later.

“Can I warm you up?” Jihoon asked, brushing his fingers hesitantly across the curve of Sanghyeok’s cheek.

“Mhm.”

Jihoon squirmed into the heap of blankets alongside Sanghyeok and pulled him as close as their current position would allow. He cupped Sanghyeok’s face with his hands and

Sanghyeok sighed and leaned into the touch like a contented cat. “I thought I told you not to come out of the shower until you were warm.” Jihoon scolded. Even as he tried to put up a lighthearted front, the ache in his chest didn’t quite go away.

“T-There wasn’t any warm w-water.” Sanghyeok mumbled.

“What?” Jihoon stared at Sanghyeok in horror, “You washed up in cold water???”

“Only a l-little. Most of the time in the bathroom was spent t-trying to get d-dressed.” Sanghyeok looked embarrassed, “It’s difficult t-to get wet clothes off and my hands were shaking a lot…”

Jihoon sought out Sanghyeok’s hands under the covers. They were as ice cold as the rest of him. Jihoon squeezed Sanghyeok’s hands and lamented the fact that the feeling was not so different from if he had grasped at a lifeless statue. “I’m sorry.” Jihoon muttered.

“What a–are you s-sorry for?” Sanghyeok’s face formed as much of a smile as his frozen muscles would allow. He tried to laugh only to fall into a coughing fit.

“I don’t know.” Jihoon admitted, “It just all feels like my fault somehow.”

“It’s not your f-fault.” Sanghyeok said, voice steadier now. He rested his head against Jihoon’s shoulder, “ Don’t be sorry. I had fun today.”

“Yeah.” Jihoon smiled, feeling the knots in his chest finally dissolve, “I had fun too. We should stop ending our days with you freezing to death though.”

“I’m not freezing to death,” Sanghyeok objected, “I’m just freezing.”

“So you admit you’re cold.”

“I never said I wasn’t.”

“Take off your jacket then.”

Sanghyeok looked taken aback, “Huh?”

“We can share body heat easier that way.” Jihoon discarded the multitude of sweaters he put on earlier and helped Sanghyeok’s still trembling limbs through his jacket. Sanghyeok opened his mouth as if to protest, but melted immediately the moment Jihoon pulled him into his arms. Sanghyeok curled closer to Jihoon in spite of himself, the heat too tantalizing to give up for the sake of pride. Sanghyeok all but crawled into Jihoon’s lap, pushing his face into the crook of Jihoon’s neck. If humans were capable of purring, Jihoon was sure Sanghyeok would be vibrating at full frequency about now. Despite the fact that Sanghyeok was clinging to Jihoon like his life depended on it, his expression still looked mutinous in a way that made Jihoon feel smug.

“See?” Jihoon said in a teasing tone, “I told you this is more efficient- ACK!” Jihoon yelped as a pair of ice cold hands found his neck. Sanghyeok laughed, face finally defrosted enough for the smile to light up his expression. Jihoon gave Sanghyeok a sulky glare, “At least give me a warning first.”

Sanghyeok raised an eyebrow, “So this is okay as long as I give you a warning?” He tapped his finger lightly against Jihoon’s neck as a reminder of what he was referring to.

Jihoon shrugged, “If it keeps you warm you can do whatever you want.”

Sanghyeok looked away and laid his head against Jihoon’s chest, his hands slid from around Jihoon’s neck to rest on his abdomen. Jihoon could feel the movement of Sanghyeok’s body as he let out a deep sigh. “You’re too kind to me.” Sanghyeok said. His tone was even and passive, but the words felt heavy.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Jihoon objected, “Think of it like an investment. If we lay here like this for long enough, then you’ll start producing enough body heat to keep me warm too. Doesn’t it make more sense to share heat instead of trying to stay warm by ourselves? It’s like giving assists in league, more gold for everyone.”

“Mmm, I don’t quite think that was what I was referring to.” Sanghyeok let out what was probably intended to be a laugh, but it sounded more like labored breathing.

“What are you talking about then?” Jihoon instinctively wrapped his arms tighter around Sanghyeok. Despite the fact that they were physically closer than they had ever been before, Jihoon was plagued with a sudden paranoia that Sanghyeok would disappear somehow.

“I’m sorry I kept pestering you to do something with me.”

“What are you talking about?” Jihoon grit his teeth and tried his best to keep the anger out of his voice, “Wasn’t I the one who suggested going out today?”

“I’m sorry anyways.”

Jihoon placed one hand against the back of Sanghyeok’s neck and one against his waist, holding him firmly but still comfortably in place. He rubbed his thumb in soothing circles against the nape of Sanghyeok’s neck and rested his cheek on top of Sanghyeok’s head, “Stop it hyung, you’re scaring me.”

“Am I?” Sanghyeok’s voice sounded melancholy, “I’m sorry for that too.”

“I forgive you for whatever you’re apologizing for, so stop talking like that.”

“Talking like what?”

“I don’t know. I don’t- You just- The way you’re talking, it’s like……..it’s like…..” Jihoon swallowed the lump of panic rising up his throat, “Like if I fall asleep right now you won’t be here when I wake up.”

“I’ll be here.” Sanghyeok said quietly, “Where else would I go?”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.” Jihoon said, voice hollow.

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

“How should I respond to that if not with another apology?”

“How about ‘I didn’t mean it. I had a great time today. Why don’t we get something to eat after we recover’?”Jihoon suggested, tone harsher than he intended.

“I didn’t mean it.” Sanghyeok curled his fingers into Jihoon’s shirt and shifted to fit more comfortably in Jihoon’s lap, “I had a great time today. After we feel better, why don’t we go get something to eat?”

Embarrassingly, Jihoon felt the sudden urge to cry. Sanghyeok’s voice rang with sincerity and soothed the panic running rampant through Jihoon’s body. They would be okay. The rain didn’t ruin everything and Jihoon didn’t ruin everything. He was out of line earlier, but he wouldn’t make that mistake again. Now that he was sure of how he was feeling, he was going to do things right. He would be the perfect gentleman. He was going to take Sanghyeok out on a date, and he would make a reservation this time, and he would dress nice, and buy him flowers….

Jihoon yawned, eyes drifting closed.

And then he would walk him home, and kiss him goodnight……..gift him chocolate on every Valentine's and something expensive but practical on his birthday….and then something expensive and not at all practical on Christmas……..and then he would do it all again the next year…..and the next……and the next…….and the next…..

Even as exhaustion blurred his thoughts and snuffed out his consciousness, Jihoon found himself smiling.

~

Selfishly, Sanghyeok wanted to lay in Jihoon's arms for just another minute. Even another second would be a blessing. Jihoon smelled faintly of rain in the most comforting way. Even while Jihoon was asleep, his hands were placed protectively–even possessively—around Sanghyeok's waist. Sanghyeok lifted his head from Jihoon's chest and immediately felt those hands tighten their grip. Sanghyeok glanced at Jihoon in alarm, the panic fading when he realized Jihoon was still fast asleep.

Even when asleep, Jihoon was beautiful in a way that was surreal yet classic. His eyes, sharp as a fox when he was awake, retained their graceful appearance even as they laid closed. His nose was perfectly straight and elegant, matching the height of his cheekbones and gentle curve of his jaw. His features were softened by the fullness of his cheeks, which Sanghyeok felt an inexplicable urge to touch everytime Jihoon smiled, and sometimes even when he wasn't smiling. In another world, maybe Jihoon would be an actor. He would no doubt be cast as the main love interest. After all, he had the perfect look for it.

Tall. Handsome. Sharp eyes that lent themselves to a striking and even intimidating appearance when he wasn't smiling, but softened into endearing crescents when he did smile. He was truly the ideal choice for casting a brooding and mysterious yet softhearted love interest. Where would Sanghyeok fit into that story? Sanghyeok smiled wryly to himself as he considered the options. He would be cast as the antagonist, obviously, as he always was. The older and possibly wealthy man that coveted the attention of the female lead in manipulative and awful ways. The man that would ultimately be defeated and cast aside, forgotten while the happy ending played out. Or, more realistically, Sanghyeok wouldn't be in the movie at all. It wasn't his world to be in. Sanghyeok gazed at Jihoon's peaceful expression, feeling a painful ache in his chest.

He should have left Jihoon alone.

In the beginning, it was nothing but friendly intention. He didn't seek Jihoon out, but he didn't turn away when Jihoon needed help. It was all friendly, impersonal even. They existed side by side for the longest time, paths mingling at the surface level but never quite colliding. That was how it should've been, how it would've been if Sanghyeok just kept to himself, if Sanghyeok wasn't so selfish. He knew deep down they were intended to be ships in the night, parallel lines that flowed side by side without ever being destined to touch.

Yet, when Jihoon asked him about soulmates that night, Sanghyeok instinctively knew that Jihoon was like him: Born with a soulmark that gave away nothing and fated him to wait in hopes that his soulmate would be the one to find him. Sanghyeok sighed, he wasn't sure when it started to bother him again. The older he got, the more likely it was that he had already passed his soulmate by. He no longer held out hope that he was still going to meet them, whoever they were. Maybe that was why, when he realized Jihoon didn't have a distinct soulmark either, he couldn't help but feel an inkling of hope that Jihoon would never find his soulmate, and maybe Sanghyeok would have a chance.

Sanghyeok almost scoffed aloud at his own thoughts. Even if Jihoon wasn't fated to find his soulmate, that still didn't automatically mean he would choose Sanghyeok either. Sanghyeok found himself staring at Jihoon again, the aching in his chest becoming more painful. When it came to someone like Jihoon, how could he resist the temptation to hope?

It was selfish of him. It was selfish to try and spend more time with Jihoon, to get closer to him, to steal touches from his hands and laughter from his lips. It was selfish of him to try to make Jihoon fall for him. Sanghyeok always knew that, but it wasn't until that moment at the koi pond that he realized how truly messed up it was, because Jihoon *did* like him back. He *did* feel drawn to Sanghyeok and he *did* reciprocate the little things Sanghyeok did. But, when the moment came, he still pulled away.

Of course he did. He was still young. The chances that he would still find his soulmate were so high. Why would he risk that perfect, picturesque happiness for someone else? Why would Sanghyeok tempt him to risk that happiness for his own selfish desires? Even now, his entire being was steeped in guilt. He knew what it was like to have a soulmark that told him nothing, how uncertain it felt and intangible the very concept of happily after was. He knew that and still took advantage of that uncertainty to steal Jihoon's favor. When the future seemed uncertain, it was easy to give in to immediate pleasures.

What would happen if Jihoon didn't snap out of it and pull away? If Sanghyeok got his way, only for Jihoon to meet his soulmate later on? That situation wouldn't end well for anyone. Jihoon's soulmate would be angry, or hurt, or even feel betrayed. Jihoon would be guilty, conflicted, or even regretful that he got involved with Sanghyeok at all. And Sanghyeok…..

He would be left behind in the end.

Even through all the hurt and betrayal, Jihoon and his soulmate would eventually work things out. With fate on their side, how could they not? Sanghyeok sighed and pushed himself up into a sitting position, stealing another glance at Jihoon's sleeping face. He needed to fix this. It was his fault Jihoon was now torn between the comfort of instant gratification and the desire to wait for his true happily ever after. It was Sanghyeok's fault Jihoon had to face any conflict at all. It was just……so easy to fall for him. Jihoon truly had everything: He was handsome, tall, talented, hard-working, ambitious, protective, reliable, devoted, and a million other things another person was destined to have all to themselves.

When it came to Jihoon, it was easy for Sanghyeok to covet what was never intended to be his, even when he himself would be the only one to lose in the end. If he continued down this path only for Jihoon to choose his soulmate in the end, would Sanghyeok survive that heartbreak? Even if Jihoon never found his soulmate, would Sanghyeok survive the guilt of hoping and praying everyday that Jihoon would never find them? Witnessing Minhyung and Minseok's meeting firsthand, he knew just how overjoyed and relieved someone could be meeting their soulmate after living their whole life unsure of whether it would happen. Even now, he remembered the look of pure elation and wonder on Minhyung's face when he realized Minseok was his soulmate. How could he claim to care about Jihoon while also hoping he never got to experience that?

Maybe it was for the best that Jihoon pulled away in that moment. It meant he was still untainted. Without a taste of the forbidden, he could still wait patiently in the garden of Eden until destiny found him. From now on, Sanghyeok wasn't going to be selfish anymore. He would return things to the way they were before, so Jihoon could be at peace and Sanghyeok could avoid a situation that would only end in heartbreak for him. It was the best decision for both of them.

Sanghyeok took one last look at Jihoon before carefully attempting to extract himself from Jihoon's arms. He had barely lifted himself out of Jihoon's lap when Jihoon tightened his grip, sending Sanghyeok falling back against Jihoon's chest. Murmuring something in his sleep, Jihoon shifted from his position leaning against the headboard to properly laying down

on the bed. He dragged Sanghyeok down with him, arms still locked firmly around his waist. They were so close that Sanghyeok could feel Jihoon's heartbeat against his back.

Sanghyeok froze in alarm, relaxing only when he realized Jihoon was still sleeping soundly. How was he going to get out of Jihoon's grip now? Jihoon's grip was firm and unyielding even while he was unconscious. He had Sanghyeok completely locked completely in place and…….and…….

And it was so warm…

Sanghyeok felt exhaustion pulling at his eyelids, consciousness slipping almost as fast as his self-control. Maybe it was okay to stay like this for just a little while. Just for today. Just one last time, Sanghyeok would let himself be selfish.

Chapter End Notes

Ta da! Our Sanghyeokie can be just as dense :`)

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They were back at the gazebo amidst clear blue water. The rain was gentle now, pattering almost melodically against the surface of the pond. Jihoon sat across from him, happily eating a bun filled with red bean paste. Sanghyeok reached out on a whim, pinching one of Jihoon's cheeks to check if they were really as soft as they looked.

"Hey!" Jihoon pulled back and gave Sanghyeok a sulky look, "That's mean."

"Why?" Sanghyeok smiled, "I like your cheeks."

Jihoon pinched at his face self-consciously, "They've gotten chubbier."

"They've gotten cuter." Sanghyeok corrected, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to each side of Jihoon's face.

"Hmm, if you say so it must be true then." Jihoon leaned forward and pushed Sanghyeok onto his back, his hand cradled Sanghyeok's head to make sure he didn't feel the impact of the bench on his way down.

"We're in public." Sanghyeok reminded half-heartedly, staring up at Jihoon with hopeful eyes.

"I don't care." Jihoon said, leaning closer.

"Good." Sanghyeok leaned upwards to meet him halfway.

He barely had time to register the softness of Jihoon's lips before the world was turned upside down. The sound of rain blurred into loud static and the faint smell of flowers vanished into nothingness.

Sanghyeok sat up with a gasp, dizzy beyond belief and a heavy fog weighing down his brain. Based off of the twisted mess of blankets and Jihoon's sudden distance, it was obvious he was jolted awake when his human pillow abruptly extracted himself from their previously intertwined position. Sanghyeok sat up, still disoriented by the sudden consciousness, "What time is it?" He mumbled groggily.

"Uh, not sure." Jihoon sounded oddly panicked. He was on the other side of the bed, as far away from Sanghyeok as he could possibly be.

Sanghyeok squinted at Jihoon, his eyes protesting at the fact that he was using them before he put on his glasses. Jihoon was flushed, his breathing quick, and panic plain in his expression. Sanghyeok frowned, "Are you okay? Did you have another bad dream?"

"My dream?" Jihoon looked like a deer caught in headlights, "A….dream. Yeah, a dream. A bad one. Yes. Bad dream. That's what happened. That's……..yeah. I think I'll go take a shower."

Jihoon's rushed words and mortified expression made it clear he wasn't telling the full story, but Sanghyeok didn't pry. During the time Sanghyeok and Jihoon stayed together, he woke up in a panic quite a lot. If he wasn't ready to talk about whatever recurring nightmares he had, Sanghyeok wasn't going to push him. Sanghyeok fumbled around the nightstand to locate his glasses as Jihoon scrambled out of bed and made a run for the bathroom.

"There's no hot water." Sanghyeok reminded.

Jihoon tensed at the sound of Sanghyeok's voice, still looking nervous and flustered, "That's fine. Cold is good. I need a cold shower. I mean, people should take cold showers…for health. I think. I read it online. Yeah. I'll be back."

Jihoon disappeared into the bathroom and Sanghyeok stared after him in confusion. Jihoon was definitely acting very odd and uncharacteristically nervous. Sanghyeok winced, maybe Jihoon felt awkward over what happened at the garden earlier. With the storm and the threat of hypothermia, there hadn't really been time to be awkward about the encounter. Now that they were both safe and warm again, maybe the embarrassment was finally hitting him. Sanghyeok took a deep breath to calm himself. He could fix this. The last thing Sanghyeok wanted to do was lose the friendship he had with Jihoon because he selfishly decided to push things further. While it was Jihoon that ultimately made the move, Sanghyeok would take responsibility for giving the invitation in the first place.

He just needed to return the dynamic between them into something lighter and friendlier, and he needed to do it in a way that wasn't abrupt or obvious. Making the change too noticeable would only result in Jihoon being hurt and confused by Sanghyeok's change in behavior. Subtlety was key. Despite the cowardly urge to simply disappear and wait for the situation to fix itself, Sanghyeok was a decade too old to employ a tactic as childish as ghosting. He needed to be tactful.

If only he never got himself into this mess in the first place. It was almost humorous. For so many years, he was fully content to live his life the way it was. Yet, the realization that Jihoon might be like him sent hope clinging to him like a parasite. The sliver of a possibility was all it took for Sanghyeok's long forgotten longing for companionship to rear its ugly head. If it was anyone other than Jihoon, maybe that suggestion of availability would've remained a harmless speculation. But because it was someone like Jihoon- No. Not someone *like* Jihoon. Because it *was* Jihoon. Only because it was him, Sanghyeok's subconscious couldn't help but nurture that harmless speculation into hope, letting it feed and grow until it infested every sliver of Sanghyeok's being. The very possibility existing was enough to chew away at Sanghyeok's sanity and drive him mad.

Was he not happy with his life as it was? His life was so full of love and so full of people who loved him. Did the absence of romantic love truly mean that much? Of course it didn't. Logically, Sanghyeok knew that. Searching out romantic love wouldn't suddenly and magically imbue his life with fulfillment he couldn't get through other means. In time, his emotions would catch up to his logic, and this silly crush would pass. His only goal right now was to make sure that his friendship with Jihoon stayed intact during that process.

Sanghyeok mulled over his options, he needed a way to avoid interacting with Jihoon without making it seem intentional. If he got too close or too friendly, temptation would find a way to creep back into his consciousness. Those dreams he kept having definitely weren't helping in that aspect. Ever since the first night they shared a bed, Sanghyeok recalled Jihoon appearing in his dream. The dreams were often forgettable and dissipated the moment daylight touched

his eyes. Those types of dreams were easy to brush off. After all, many people in his life appeared in his dreams every once in a while.

The more recent dreams, however, were a little bit more difficult to ignore and a lot more embarrassing to think about. They were always cast in horrifyingly rosy lighting and depicted Jihoon like the love interest of a poorly written teen novel. In those dreams, Sanghyeok was always blind to everything but Jihoon. In return, the dream version of Jihoon had eyes for nothing else but Sanghyeok.

“Those were nothing but dreams,” Sanghyeok said out loud to himself, “Forget them.”

He closed his eyes and cleared his thoughts, along with the memory of every kiss they shared within that fabricated world. The timeline where Jihoon didn’t pull away from the almost-kiss didn’t exist. Living in reality was that much more painful when his delusions were so beautiful.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Jihoon didn’t kiss Sanghyeok at the koi pond.

Take a deep breath.

That day in the rain, Jihoon didn’t confess his love.

Let that breath go.

Jihoon wasn’t in love with him.

Relax and open your eyes.

Sanghyeok couldn't be in love with Jihoon.

So he decided not to be.

~

Jihoon stared at himself in the mirror, droplets of cold water still dripping from his hair. "Jeong Jihoon, pull yourself the fuck together." he scolded himself, "Keep your hands to yourself and your dreams out of the gutter before you ruin your chance with him."

He sighed and buried his head in his hands. He didn't even know which part of this whole situation was the worst, the fact that he had a not so appropriate dream about Sanghyeok or the fact that he woke up with his hand up Sanghyeok's shirt and a very noticeable problem plaguing the bottom half of his body. With the way their bodies were pressed together, there was no way Sanghyeok wouldn't have felt it if he woke up first.

The bright side, and it was a *very* bright side, was that Sanghyeok was obviously too deeply asleep to notice a thing. The memory of the Sanghyeok sitting on the bed with ruffled hair and eyes narrowed against the sudden light of awakeness made Jihoon smile. He looked like a disheveled cat in the most endearing way, so much so that Jihoon didn't feel so guilty about waking him up preemptively. Not that he would do it again on purpose, no matter how cute Sanghyeok looked with his face scrunched up in distaste for his unfortunate state of awakeness.

Still shivering from the miserable but necessary time he spent standing in the freezing shower water, Jihoon quickly pulled on his clothes and dried off his hair the best he could. He carefully rearranged his hair to look nice before he emerged from the bathroom again. Sanghyeok was still sitting in bed, staring out the window with a pensive expression. He flinched slightly when Jihoon walked back into the room, but didn't turn to look at him. Jihoon felt a stab of guilt, was Sanghyeok still hurt from what happened earlier? What if he was mad?

"Hyung?" Jihoon called tentatively, trying his best to keep the nervousness out of his voice, "How are you feeling?"

“I’m feeling a lot better now,” Sanghyeok turned to him with a smile, “Thank you.”

The weight on Jihoon’s chest lifted a little, maybe Sanghyeok wasn’t mad at him?

“Are you hungry? We can get food at the restaurant downstairs.” Jihoon suggested hopefully.

“I still feel a bit tired.” Sanghyeok said apologetically, “You can go by yourself, I can buy myself food later if I get hungry.”

“Oh. Okay.” Jihoon deflated a little, “I can wait and then come with you later?”

“No need, you should eat if you’re hungry.” Sanghyeok insisted, “I’ll be fine, I just need more rest.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.” Jihoon agreed reluctantly, “Stay warm okay? You should put your jacket back on to retain heat now that you're at a normal temperature again. And stay under the blankets. Should I ask for more blankets when I head down to the lobby? I can also ask about when the heating will start working again. And the hot water. Or-”

“Jihoon.” Sanghyeok interrupted, an amused expression on his face, “I’ll be fine. I can call the front desk with the room’s phone if I need something.”

“Right.” Jihoon felt a hint of unease even though Sanghyeok’s expression was as open and friendly as ever, “I’ll go get food then.”

“Could you hand me the book on the table before you go? I don’t want to get up.”

The slight pout on Sanghyeok's face as he glanced at the distance between the bed and table eased Jihoon’s anxiety slightly. That kind of request definitely indicated a sense of familiarity Jihoon was scared he put in jeopardy with his little mistake. Seeing an expression other than a friendly smile was also a relief. Somehow, those reserved smiles felt too impersonal now.

Jihoon smiled to himself as he walked over to hand Sanghyeok his book, he only just realized his feelings for Sanghyeok and he was already so greedy. Friendly smiles and casual conversation, things he was once happy to have, didn't quite seem like enough anymore.

His anxiety spiked again when Sanghyeok took the book with a quick "thank you" and immediately busied himself with reading it. Was that normal? Would the Sanghyeok from yesterday respond like that? Jihoon really couldn't tell if Sanghyeok was truly acting differently or if he was just paranoid. There was nothing definitive Jihoon could point out, but he still couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Even as Jihoon walked out the door, Sanghyeok didn't look up from his book. He knew it. Sanghyeok *was* mad at him about earlier. Of course he was. Thinking about it now, it would be even weirder if he was completely unaffected by it. If he thought about it even more, Sanghyeok being upset about it is probably a good sign. It meant he was hoping Jihoon went through with the kiss, didn't it?

But it also meant that Sanghyeok was currently upset at him. That wouldn't do. What should Jihoon do to help? What was something that subtly but effectively said "I'm sorry"?

Food, of course. He would definitely have to order something for Sanghyeok while he was already downstairs. What else? He would've bought food for Sanghyeok even if he wasn't mad, so obviously Jihoon needed to do something extra too. He mulled it over while he waited in line to order, only to come up with nothing but the realization that he was completely out of his depth when it came to relationships. He would need to do more research. But for now, time to call backup.

"Hello?"

"Hi Minseokie." Jihoon greeted.

"I'd be polite and ask you if you're okay since you're stranded but I know you called me for a reason." Minseok said bluntly but lightheartedly, "So, what do you need?"

"When Minhyung gets mad at you what do you do?"

"Minhyung doesn't get mad at me." Minseok said smugly.

Jihoon rolled his eyes, “He must get mad at you sometimes.”

“When he’s upset about something he tells me and I just have to listen and be receptive. So I guess when he’s mad at me I let him express his thoughts with an open mind.”

Jihoon wrinkled his nose, “That sounds…..”

“Healthy and mature?” Minseok said with a laugh, “I’m guessing whoever you’re dealing with isn’t going to express his feelings directly though.”

“It’s a hypothetical.” Jihoon said, “There’s no person.”

“Sure.” Minseok said skeptically.

“Shut up.” Jihoon mumbled, “Fine. What does Minhyung do when you’re mad at him?”

“He buys me something cute and sits at my feet with puppy eyes until I give in and realize I was being unreasonable.” Minseok said, tone fond.

Jihoon raised an eyebrow, “And if you actually had a good reason to be mad? If that ever happens.”

“Rude.” Minseok huffed, “Well, if I’m actually being reasonable then he makes Wooje find out why I’m upset and then buys me the appropriate magnitude of a gift before apologizing and promising he won’t do it again.”

Jihoon frowned, that wasn’t quite the answer he was looking for either, “What if the person doesn’t really like gifts?”

“Hypothetical situation huh?” Minseok teased. “Do I know this person?”

“There’s no person.” Jihoon insisted, “Just answer the question.”

“Well, hypothetically, why is this person mad at you?”

“Uhhhhh,” Jihoon cringed when he thought back to his almost-kiss with Sanghyeok, “No reason?”

“Hyung, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.” Minseok chided.

Jihoon paused, considering for a second if telling Minseok everything was worth it. No. There was no guarantee he wouldn’t immediately leak the news to his teammates. There was also no guarantee Minseok would be supportive enough to play matchmaker for them. Minseok had always been more of the romantic type, he would probably want Sanghyeok to find his soulmate instead wouldn’t he?

“I hurt their feelings but I don’t think they want me to bring that up.” Jihoon said, keeping it vague.

“Oh. That’s easy then. Just show them that you didn’t mean it through your actions or with roundabout words.” Minseok said like it was the simplest thing in the world.

“That makes no sense.”

“You don’t want to mention that moment specifically right? So just figure out why whatever you did was hurtful and make sure they realize it doesn’t reflect your actual feelings.”

Jihoon sighed, “That still makes no sense.”

“Okay so imagine there’s a cat.”

Jihoon couldn’t help but smile despite his stress. If the analogy involved a cat, it was bound to be helpful for Sanghyeok in some way.

“And you step on the cat’s tail accidentally,” Minseok continued, “It’s a cat, so it’s not like you can just apologize and say you didn’t mean to hurt them. You have to convey that with your actions.”

“Huh, that was actually surprisingly helpful.” Jihoon mused, “Show that I didn’t mean it through my actions….”

“So…do I get to know who it is now?” Minseok said hopefully.

“No. I’m hanging up now.”

“Lame.” Minseok said with a pout, “Fine. Good luck anyways. Invite me to the wedding.”

Jihoon found himself grinning ear to ear as he pocketed his phone and went to pick up the food. If he implied that he wasn’t interested when he pulled away, then he just had to make it obvious that he actually was interested. That couldn’t be too difficult, right? Well, even if it was, Jihoon was a quick learner. He just needed to study and prepare so he wouldn’t mess up again. It was perfect timing really, while Sanghyeok read his book and got some rest Jihoon could research the best approach to use.

“Hyung, I’m back!” Jihoon walked into the room to see Sanghyeok still reading the book in bed. Sanghyeok smiled at him as he came in.

“You’re back early,” Sanghyeok commented, “I thought you were going to sit down and eat at the restaurant.”

“The wait time was too long for that,” Jihoon lied, “Take out is more convenient. I got you something too, so you can heat it up later when you’re hungry.”

“You didn’t have to,” Sanghyeok chided.

“I wanted to.” Jihoon said with a pout, “If you don’t eat it I’ll be sad.”

The corner of Sanghyeok’s lips twitched as he tried to suppress a smile. “I’ll eat it.” he promised, “Thank you.”

Jihoon felt a twinge of disappointment when Sanghyeok went back to reading his book. He didn’t even realize it, but he was secretly hoping Sanghyeok would be inclined to join Jihoon for dinner since Jihoon bought the food anyway. It definitely seemed like Sanghyeok was intentionally being more distant. Or maybe he was feeling more sick than Jihoon thought? Jihoon could never tell if his worries were valid or simply products of his overthinking. He quickly cut off the train of thought beginning to form and opened up his laptop instead. Overthinking was a hindrance, he needed to use his time wisely. There was no telling how long the storm would last.

Where should he start? Any advice needed to come from a credible source. A relationship blog maybe? What even made someone qualified to give love advice? Jihoon clicked on a video featuring a happy looking couple titled, “I married someone who wasn’t my soulmate”. He listened attentively as the woman talked about how difficult it was to date in a world where most people were lucky enough to skip the prelude and immediately jump into relationships. With soulmates there was no question of “is he interested?” or “what if he doesn’t like me back?” Real dating was much harder.

That single video led Jihoon down a rabbit hole of content, his algorithm doing its job quickly and effectively to deliver him exactly the content he wanted. Most of the advice seemed obvious to him, but it still gave him a sense of comfort to hear it from someone else’s mouth. Once he looked for it, there was a surprising wealth of content geared towards people who had given up on finding their soulmate. The advice ranged from tips on how to read body language to lists and lists of cheesy pick up lines. Jihoon paused in his scrolling when a video titled “Things I wish I knew before I had sex” caught his eye. Surely it was too soon to

research this type of thing? Would it be too presumptuous to just have a look? It wasn't like he was expecting anything, but wasn't it always better to be prepared just in case?

It wasn't until he had already clicked on the video that he realized how little he truly knew about……Jihoon groaned and hid his face in his hands. How was he going to get anywhere if he couldn't even think about it without hyperventilating? Instinct could only get him so far, he needed to be more prepared than that. The logistics, the common mistakes, he had to know them all if he didn't want to mess up again.

"Are you alright?"

Sanghyeok's voice made Jihoon jump out of his skin. He slammed his laptop shut and looked up, relieved to see that Sanghyeok was still sitting on the bed. "Yeah. I'm fine." Jihoon said unconvincingly.

"You just looked a bit stressed." Sanghyeok glanced down at Jihoon's now closed laptop but didn't comment further.

"Well, I was actually worried you weren't eating because you didn't like what I bought you. So I was searching online for any instances where you talked about food preferences…" Jihoon let his mouth run ahead of his still panicking brain, the lie spinning together surprisingly coherently, "I thought it would be embarrassing if you saw, but I guess I'm telling you anyway so that doesn't matter…"

Success. A flustered look captured Sanghyeok's features and Jihoon tried his best to keep the giddy smile off his face. "I just wasn't hungry, it had nothing to do with what you ordered." Sanghyeok said, words coming out rushed in his panic, "I didn't mean to make you think- I'm really happy you brought me food. I really am. I can- I'll eat it right now."

"I'll heat it up for you." Jihoon offered immediately, moving to take the food out of the refrigerator before Sanghyeok even got out of bed.

"I can do it myself." Sanghyeok protested, "You don't need to get up-"

“Too late.” Jihoon said smugly as he popped the container into the microwave.

Sanghyeok shook his head fondly, “You’re ridiculous.”

If Jihoon hadn’t been staring so intently, he would’ve missed the shadow of sadness flitting across Sanghyeok’s expression. It was brief, barely perceptible even though Jihoon was actively studying Sanghyeok’s face. But why would Sanghyeok be sad?

The microwave beeped and both Sanghyeok and Jihoon stood up in response. Jihoon was faster once again, beating Sanghyeok to the microwave and waving at him to sit back down. “I’ll get it for you. You should rest up a little more. Do you feel sick at all?”

The brief hint of sadness was more obvious this time. It looked almost mournful, like Sanghyeok was grieving something he had lost. The sadness was quickly painted over by a well practiced smile. “I don’t think I’m sick. Don’t worry.” Sanghyeok reassured him.

“Did you want to go see the night markets with me after you eat then?” Jihoon asked hopefully, “The rain seems like it’s gotten calmer and the nearest market is pretty close. It’s not as big as the most popular one but it’s a much shorter walk.”

“I’m not sure I want to go outside quite yet.” Sanghyeok said apologetically.

The rejection didn’t sting as much as before. Jihoon knew Sanghyeok would probably say no. Besides, Jihoon wasn’t sure he wanted to make Sanghyeok go outside in the cold anyway. “What did you want from the market then? I can go get it for you.” Jihoon offered, “The street food is supposed to be really good. They also have flowers and little trinkets and even clothing.”

“There’s no need for that.” Sanghyeok said. Instead of sadness this time, a look of slight confusion passed through Sanghyeok’s face. “You don’t need to get me anything you know. Are you still guilty about us getting caught in the rain earlier? You know it’s not your fault.”

“I’m not doing this because I’m guilty. I’m doing this because I want to.” Jihoon said honestly. If the advice online told him to be candid with his feelings, then Jihoon would do just that. “If I get you a gift and you smile, then I get to take credit for that smile. Therefore, I want to get you gifts.”

Sanghyeok looked stunned, the confusion now plain on his face and the sadness nowhere in sight. “You…..I don’t think I understand.”

“No? I thought that statement was pretty straightforward.” Jihoon teased, “If you want me to explain it better then I’d be happy to. I want to know that I’m the reason you’re smi-”

“No, no,” Sanghyeok interrupted, cheeks flushed pink, “I didn’t mean- I just- you’re just acting a bit odd toda- right now. You’re acting odd right now.”

“Well, I had a lot on my mind for the past few days and I just figured it out today.” Jihoon held Sanghyeok’s gaze until he looked away, cheeks turning even redder. Jihoon felt a twinge of hope. The way Sanghyeok was reacting, he must’ve realized what Jihoon was hinting at. Jihoon leaned forward, deciding to push his luck, “Now that I’m sure about everything I guess my thoughts are flowing more easily now. It’s easier to express how I’m feeling.”

Sanghyeok stared down at his food, “That’s good to hear. I’m glad. You did seem stressed ever since you got here, it’s good that it’s passing.”

Jihoon resisted the urge to pout at Sanghyeok’s non-answer. He ducked his head in an attempt to catch Sanghyeok’s gaze, “So, is there anything I can get you then? Otherwise I might have to get one of everything to maximize my chances of getting something you like.”

Sanghyeok didn’t respond, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. When he opened them again, he met Jihoon’s gaze easily with a friendly smile, “Maybe if they have any cute keychains? You know the ones with the cute characters Minseokie likes. That would make a nice gift for him.”

Jihoon's sudden confidence evaporated in the face of the perfectly curated smile on Sanghyeok's lips. He couldn't help but get a sinking feeling that everything was going to go wrong. For some reason, he wanted to be anywhere but here. He wished he could run out the door, but Sanghyeok's eyes kept him rooted in place as they looked at him expectantly, waiting for a response. Every cell in his body was screaming as if he was in danger and his mouth felt too dry to form words. Maybe if he didn't respond, they could stay like this, never moving forward to the disaster Jihoon was sure was looming.

"Yeah." Jihoon choked out, "I-I'll keep an eye out for something like that."

"Really?" Sanghyeok's smile widened without showing his teeth.

Run.

Now.

Leave.

"Thank you Jihoon."

Run.

RUn.

RUN.

NOW.

Sanghyeok tilted his head, a perfectly calculated drop of sheepishness blending into his pleasant smile, “You know, you’ve done so much for me and I really should have expressed this earlier…”

Nonononononononononononono.

Stop.

Leave.

Move.

Get out.

Please.

Run.

RUN.

But his limbs wouldn’t move.

Sanghyeok smiled, perfectly polite and devastating.

“You’re a really good friend Jihoon. I’m lucky to have a friend like you.”

Chapter End Notes

When in doubt, escape into ao3 😊

(Next chapter will be this weekend so don't hate me too much for this cliffhanger asdfghjhk)

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The room felt like it was spinning. Maybe it was. Maybe the whole world was actually crashing down around him. Maybe that would be preferable to this. Anything would be preferable to this.

Sanghyeok laughed sheepishly, “Sorry, did I make it awkward by saying something so cheesy?”

No.

Stop talking.

Please.

Every word felt like a needle in his heart–not quite enough to kill him but enough so that every heartbeat felt like agony and every breath hurt to take. It wasn’t supposed to go this way. Jihoon wished he could turn back time to before he said anything. To before he scoured the internet for advice and gave himself unearned confidence. To before he pulled away when he was only centimeters shy of kissing Sanghyeok, back when Sanghyeok was going to let him.

Jihoon stood up abruptly and turned his back to Sanghyeok, feeling tears welling up in his eyes. It was all so stupid. Where did it all go wrong? Why did Sanghyeok reject him? Or did he truly not know how Jihoon felt? Was that even possible? That it was a simple misunderstanding, and Sanghyeok wasn’t rejecting him. Maybe he didn’t pick up on Jihoon’s feelings for him. Or maybe he still thought Jihoon was awkward over the should-have-been-kiss and clarified that they were still friends to comfort him.

Maybe it was *anything* else, and Jihoon still had a chance. Right. As long as he had a chance, no matter how hopeless it seemed, he needed to keep trying. So many things in his life

seemed hopeless at some point, but that had never stopped him. Why should he let it stop him now? He wasn't a coward. Well, maybe he was sometimes. But if he was to choose anytime to change that, now seemed like a good bet.

"Hyung."

There was a moment of silence before Sanghyeok responded.

"Yes?"

Sanghyeok's voice was pleasant as ever, every syllable ringing clear and impersonal.

Jihoon couldn't bring himself to turn and face Sanghyeok. If he saw that smile still on Sanghyeok's face, he was afraid his resolve would all come crashing down again. He wiped away the tears still threatening to overflow and took a deep breath. He needed to do this. If he didn't confront Sanghyeok now, it would be a regret that clung to him forever.

"You know," Jihoon started, voice shaky, "When I first met you I would've given anything to be friends with you. And then, when I ended up here with you, I was so excited to have a chance to make that wish come true. To have you call me your friend." Jihoon finally turned around, letting every drop of pain and desperation show on his face, "So why is it then, that I don't like that word at all right now?"

Sanghyeok flinched, "Jihoon-"

"I hate it." Jihoon spat through clenched teeth, "I hate it so much, and I know exactly why."

Sanghyeok looked away, "Jihoon, I don't think-"

Jihoon took a step closer and Sanghyeok froze in panic. The emotions on Sanghyeok's face were real now, and they encouraged Jihoon to continue walking forward. He closed the

distance until Sanghyeok had to look upwards to meet Jihoon's gaze, "Lee Sanghyeok, I really like you. How do you feel about me?"

Sanghyeok turned red, blushing all the way down to his neck, "Jihoon, I don't think you're listening to me-"

"But are you listening to me?" Jihoon countered, he leaned forward until their foreheads were almost touching, "I like you Sanghyeok hyung. I like you so much that I think about you even in my sleep. I like you so much that I'm happy to be a fool if only you'll look my way."

"Jihoon…."

"I mean it hyung." Jihoon said, voice quiet and hesitant now, "I'm not confused, or unsure, or misled, or any other excuse you'll make up so that you can pretend this isn't real. Earlier when I pulled away, I was unsure, and I'm sorry if it hurt you. I promise that I've never been more sure of anything now."

Sanghyeok's eyes went wide with panic when Jihoon leaned closer, but he didn't move a muscle even as Jihoon reached up to touch his face. Jihoon caressed Sanghyeok's cheek gently before cupping his face with both hands. Slowly, tenderly, he pressed a kiss to Sanghyeok's forehead. Sanghyeok relaxed into his touch, tilting his head upwards so that their noses brushed against each other and their lips were a breath away from touching.

Jihoon held Sanghyeok's gaze steadily, unwaveringly, "Won't you accept my feelings?"

Sanghyeok was the one to pull away first this time, "I can't."

"You can't?" Jihoon said in a challenging tone, "Why not? Do you not feel the same way about me? Did you not feel hurt when I pulled away earlier? Did you not feel your chest ache even a little bit when you called me a 'friend'?"

Sanghyeok avoided his gaze, "That doesn't matter."

“Of course it matters!” Jihoon said, raising his voice, “What else would matter except how you and I feel?”

Sanghyeok looked down at the floor, “A lot of things.”

“Name one.” Jihoon spat, his body was shaking with anger now. Not even at Sanghyeok, but at everything else. At the stupid societal expectations and pressures he once felt himself. At the stupid idea that this was somehow wrong just because of some tattoos they didn’t even choose. “Name one excuse that isn’t bullshit.”

Sanghyeok glanced back up at Jihoon, eyes filled with shame and regret, “Because I’m scared.”

All at once, the anger burning through Jihoon’s veins dissipated. It was quickly replaced by an overwhelming feeling of guilt and panic. That pained expression on Sanghyeok’s face, it was Jihoon’s fault.

“I’m sorry.” Jihoon mumbled. He pulled Sanghyeok into a hug, and Sanghyeok let him. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I……I didn’t mean to push you or make you uncomfortable. It just felt like you were pushing me away, and I got scared. I won’t pressure you to accept or reciprocate my feelings, that wasn’t my intention at all. It was just- when you- just……don’t push me away. Please. Don’t shut me out.”

“I thought that would make it easier for you.” Sanghyeok mumbled, his voice barely louder than a sigh.

“Easier for me to what?”

“To stay along the path you’re supposed to walk.”

“That’s bullshit, hyung.” Jihoon tightened his grip around Sanghyeok, “Since when do you get to decide what’s best for me?”

“It was also the best decision to make for my own good.” Sanghyeok said quietly.

Sanghyeok’s words hurt more than Jihoon expected. He wanted, with all his being, to ask Sanghyeok what he meant. To ask Sanghyeok if he didn’t think Jihoon was good enough for him. To beg and promise he would be better if Sanghyeok gave him a chance. If that was the reason, would Jihoon survive hearing those words come out of Sanghyeok’s mouth? Even if it was the reason, would he survive never knowing for sure what Sanghyeok meant?

“Why?” Jihoon asked quietly.

“Because I won’t survive when you leave.”

Jihoon’s brain went blank with surprise, even the most intense fear and anxiety evaporating in the face of how absurd Sanghyeok’s response was. “Huh?”

“I always wonder, is it better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all?” Sanghyeok mused, his voice soft with melancholy, “Are those moments of happiness worth the pain? Surely a man given a glimpse of heaven lives more miserably than a man that doesn’t realize heaven is a possibility. Why is it that knowledge brings satisfaction but ignorance is bliss?”

“What- Huh?” Jihoon pulled back with a flabbergasted expression. He gripped Sanghyeok’s shoulders and only barely resisted the temptation to shake him until he started making sense again. “What are you talking about? Why am I leaving? Am I missing something?”

The pained expression didn’t leave Sanghyeok’s face, “You’re still young Jihoon. The chances that you’ll meet your soulmate-”

“What are you- you’re already assuming I’ll leave you someday just because I might find my soulmate?” Jihoon interrupted, voice incredulous, “I don’t care about my soulmate!”

“You may say that now, but the feeling you’ll get the moment you find them-”

“I’ve already met them!” Jihoon blurted. “My soulmate. I met him already.”

Sanghyeok’s eyes widened, “You know who your soulmate is?”

“Well, not exactly,” Jihoon grimaced as he thought about the best way to explain it all, “I just know I’ve met him already. I met him and we passed each other by, which means he didn’t realize I was his soulmate either. But I don’t care about that now, it’s in the past.” Jihoon gave Sanghyeok a hopeful look, “I want to think about the future.”

“I don’t understand.” The look on Sanghyeok’s face made it clear he wasn’t about to drop the subject, “How do you- if you didn’t- how do you know you’ve met him already if you didn’t recognize each other?”

“Well there’s this thing with dreams…” Jihoon rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, “It’s a bit of a long story. If you meet your soulmate you get special dreams about them that give you hints to who they are. That’s how I know I met him, because I had those special dreams. But I don’t care about finding him. Just because the universe chose him for me doesn’t mean *I* have to choose him. If I like you, why can’t I choose you instead?”

Sanghyeok sighed, “It doesn’t work like that.”

“Why not?” Jihoon argued, “Plenty of people are happily married even if they never find their soulmate. Soulmate’s aren’t the end all be all, why should we leave it all up to fate?”

“It’s different.” Sanghyeok insisted, “Those are people that never found their soulmate, but if you say you know you met him then you have a chance. If you have a chance to find him, why wouldn’t you take it?”

“Because I fell in love with you.”

Sanghyeok winced, “Jihoon, you can’t say that-”

“Why not?” Jihoon stepped closer again, “It’s true. I choose you. I’ve met my soulmate and I’ll choose you anyway. Everytime. Won’t you choose me too?”

For the first time, there was a spark of hope flickering in Sanghyeok’s pained eyes, “Can I really?”

“Why not?” Jihoon repeated, “We can choose our own destiny.”

Sanghyeok laughed, and the sound filled Jihoon with a relief he didn’t know he needed. “You make it sound so easy,” Sanghyeok said wryly.

“Maybe it *is* that easy.” Jihoon suggested.

“I don’t know.” Sanghyeok said, “I’ve seen the type of happiness soulmate’s share. I can’t help but feel like I’m making you give that up.”

“I’m giving it up willingly because you make me happier.” Jihoon corrected.

A flicker of amusement passed through Sanghyeok’s expression, “You say everything so confidently. If your soulmate sought you out, do you truly think you wouldn’t care at all? You say I make you happier, but on what grounds do you make that claim? You have no baseline to compare it to.”

“In the dreams-” Jihoon broke off, biting back his rash words. Talking about the kind of dreams he had about his soulmate and how they made him feel was probably not the best way

to endear himself to Sanghyeok. It felt far too close to talking about an ex even though Jihoon never even spoke to his soulmate.

“In the end, my soulmate is just another person.” Jihoon pointed out instead, “A stranger. If I’ve already given my heart to you, why would I be swayed by someone I don’t even know?”

“Again, you make it all sound so easy.” Sanghyeok laughed.

“Well, it *is* easy for me.” Jihoon said, “That’s how much I like you.”

Sanghyeok ducked his head to hide his smile, “Were you always this sappy?”

“No, I’m just in love.”

Sanghyeok shot Jihoon a half-hearted glare, “Stop that.”

“Why?” Jihoon grinned cheerfully, “How else should I convey how much I like you? If I say it a million times, will you believe me then? Will you be less scared of taking a leap of faith with me?”

“A million times is a lot…” Sanghyeok said evasively, “That’s not realistic.”

“Hyung.” Jihoon cupped Sanghyeok’s cheeks with both hands, holding his face so that he couldn’t look away, “Say you like me and I’ll say it back a million times. Say you feel the same way, and I’ll wait as long as it takes for you to be ready. As long as I know you feel the same way there’s nothing I won’t do and no amount of time I wouldn’t be willing to wait.”

Sanghyeok leaned into Jihoon’s touch, the last of the apprehension finally melting away. He smiled and looked up at Jihoon with eyes filled with a tenuous hope. “I don’t know how I feel.” Sanghyeok admitted, “This is all new to me. Foreign. Frightening. I’ve buried these thoughts for so long that I don’t know what I want anymore. All I know is that, when you

said you liked me, I did feel happy. Even amidst the fear and confusion, there was a part of me that wanted to smile."

"Yeah?" Jihoon gave Sanghyeok a hopeful look.

"Yeah." Sanghyeok allowed a tentative smile to grace his lips, "If that's enough for you, Jeong Jihoon, will you wait for me?"

Jihoon rested his forehead against Sanghyeok's, cradling his face gently in his hands. "For as long as it takes. I'll wait for you."

CRASH.

Jihoon immediately pulled Sanghyeok closer as the lights around them flickered feebly before leaving them in the dark. Sanghyeok wriggled free from Jihoon's grip so he could look around properly. "A power outage?" Sanghyeok mumbled, "That's strange. The weather report didn't say anything about the storm getting worse…."

The crash of lightning outside rendered whatever faith they had in the weather report null and void. Slowly, the sea of lights that made up the skyline began to disappear. The darkness spread outward like a shockwave, the hotel standing at the center of it all. The bolts of lightning snaking down from the sky looked eerily close to their window. Each flash of lightning took more and more lights with it until the entire city was enveloped in an inky blackness.

One last bolt of lightning cut through the clouds like a lance, illuminating everything in brilliant blue one last time before they were thrown into pitch darkness. Then it was quiet. No lightning. No electricity. Not a sound aside from the steady drum of rain against the earth. A chill settled over the room, the last of the central heating washed away by the bitter cold creeping in.

"Jihoon?" Sanghyeok's voice sounded shaky.

Jihoon didn’t even have time to respond before he felt Sanghyeok’s body slump against his.

“I’m cold.”

Chapter End Notes

In my defense I had that chapter written before the match even happened the timing was just bad ashudvdkjlkeaels don't hurt me.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Divine intervention.

Jihoon tried his best not to think too much as he rushed down the stairs to the front lobby. He just needed to find out what was happening and when the power was coming back. The heating being broken in their room was bad enough; Now that it affected the entire building, the chill made his skin sting and bones ache. Sanghyeok was still recovering from getting caught in the storm earlier, and now this…..

Divine intervention. The longer two soulmates spent in close proximity with each other, the more likely some unknown force would interfere to bring them together. That was the rule.

However, if there was an obstacle that prevented that, what would that unseen force do then?

Don't think, don't think, don't think-

Wouldn't the heavens take it into their own hands and remove that roadblock?

Don't think. Don't think. Blankets. Heat packs. Warmth. Sanghyeok needed to be warm.

What if it wasn't a coincidence?

"Stop it." Jihoon said out loud, "Get out of my head."

Wasn't the timing too convenient?

Jihoon shivered. What if it was true? It seemed like every time he tried to move things forward with Sanghyeok, something unnatural happened. The sudden storm, the power outage, the chilling cold. What if none of it was a coincidence? What if it was all a sign from the universe that he was doing something wrong?

“Calm down! Everyone!”

The sound of voices and a gentle orange glow greeted Jihoon when he finally made it to the lobby.

“The power is out and we are currently working on a fix. Anyone needing an electric lamp can come get one. Due to limited supply it is limited to one per room.”

Jihoon pushed his way through the crowd, “What about other supplies? Do you have any more blankets? Or anything else to help with staying warm?”

The man shoved a lamp into his hands and waved at him to leave, “This is all we have for now. If there are further developments we will let everyone know.”

“What about food!” Someone else called.

“And water!”

“The internet is out too!”

The mass of people began to shove past Jihoon, panicked voices growing louder. Jihoon ducked away and headed back towards the stairs. He wasn’t going to get anywhere staying down here, he needed to go back and check on Sanghyeok. The cold seemed to get to Sanghyeok even faster this time, the two days of weathering the rain taking their toll. It was unnatural, having all the heat stripped from your body and painstakingly building it back up only to have it snuffed out again. Now that Jihoon thought about it, Sanghyeok definitely wasn’t eating enough to sustain that kind of effort either.

Thanks to the light from the lamp, Jihoon made it back to the room in half the time it took him to get down to the lobby. “Hyung? I’m back. I got a source of light but it looks like the power won’t be back for a while.”

Sanghyeok made a low humming noise to acknowledge Jihoon’s return, but didn’t try to get up. Jihoon set the lamp on the bedside table, letting the bluish light wash over Sanghyeok. He almost wished he hadn’t. Under the pale blue light, Sanghyeok looked more sick than ever. With his pallid countenance and lavender tinted lips, he hardly looked like he harbored any life at all. He laid completely still on the bed, his body too tired even to shiver.

Jihoon squeezed into the bundle of blankets alongside Sanghyeok, tossing away his thicker outer layers so he could share his body heat more efficiently. He helped Sanghyeok out of his bulky coat and pulled it tightly around both of them. “You should’ve eaten more earlier,” Jihoon sighed, gently stroking Sanghyeok hair, “You weren’t wearing a jacket when you got up from bed earlier either. I should’ve noticed. I would’ve made you go put on a jacket before I started monologuing.”

Sanghyeok didn’t respond, still completely limp in Jihoon’s arms aside from a brief, feeble shiver. Jihoon shifted Sanghyeok so that he was leaning against Jihoon’s chest before massaging Sanghyeok’s hands gently. Slowly, the ice cold hands softened and warmed in his touch. He was so focused on the task that it startled him when the now warm hands curled around his.

“You’re awake?” Jihoon said, startled.

Sanghyeok stirred, shifting to sit more comfortably in Jihoon’s lap, “I’ve been awake, just too tired to talk. I feel so weak. A little bit dizzy too. Better now that you’re here.”

“What’s wrong with the weather?” Jihoon huffed, squeezing Sanghyeok protectively, “It’s so cold I’m surprised it’s not snowing.”

“Actually, I think it’s hailing now.”

“Really?” Jihoon looked out the window as if he would see anything other than pitch darkness.

“Listen to it.”

Jihoon went quiet and focused on the sound of the pattering. “It all sounds the same to me.” Jihoon said with a pout.

Sanghyeok laughed, “Maybe. It’s just a guess. I was just thinking about it, isn’t it a bit humorous that these changes in weather always happen at the most inconvenient times? Maybe if it didn’t start storming we could’ve talked things out earlier today. Then, just now, we didn’t even have time to finish our talk before the lightning took out the power. I wonder, if we try to finish the conversation right now, will an earthquake bring down the building?”

Sanghyeok said it in a joking tone, but Jihoon couldn’t help but flinch. If these weather events were truly signs from the universe wouldn’t it be dangerous to pursue Sanghyeok even further? Before now, he thought there was no obstacle he wouldn’t overcome. But if it came to Sanghyeok’s safety, was Jihoon really willing to take the chance?

“Jihoon?” Sanghyeok poked Jihoon’s arm, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Jihoon mumbled, “It’s just. I’m just worried all this is my fault? I don’t know. It’s weird.”

“Your fault?” Sanghyeok gave Jihoon a confused look, “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s going to sound crazy if I explain it.”

Sanghyeok shrugged, “I don’t mind.”

“Well, since I’m close to my soulmate the universe is going to try to push me to find him which is why the rain is keeping us stranded here in China. But since I’m with you instead, I’m worried the universe is going to intervene to push us apart and then you might get hurt.” Jihoon blurted, cringing inwardly when it sounded just as insane out loud as it did in his head.

“You think…..this storm, the one costing dozens of airlines millions in revenue loss, is happening because you ran into your soulmate?” Sanghyeok clarified slowly.

“I knew you would think I’m crazy.” Jihoon sulked.

“I just- It’s hard to believe.”

“I read a story online about this happening to someone. She was in close proximity with her soulmate for so long that the universe trapped them in an elevator and shut off the air conditioning until they realized they were soulmates.” Even as Jihoon spoke, he was aware that it really wasn’t making him seem any more sane than before.

“An elevator breaking down and a widespread natural disaster are pretty different in magnitude.” Sanghyeok pointed out, still sounding taken aback.

“I know, I guess there’s no way to prove it.” Jihoon sighed, “But I’m worried anyways. If there’s even a small chance that me being near you will get you hurt, I need to consider it.”

“Well, if we think about it more, the storm didn’t do too much harm.” Sanghyeok said thoughtfully.

“Didn’t do harm?” Jihoon repeated, trying his best to keep his voice calm, “Are you kidding? Even now, is your body capable of generating its own heat yet? You’ve spent this entire day on the verge of hypothermia, how is that not harmful?”

“I meant to our, uh,” Sanghyeok fidgeted slightly, embarrassed, “Our….relationship. How is giving me hypothermia a way of driving us apart? If anything, it’s only forced us into closer proximity.”

“I guess so.” Jihoon frowned. Sanghyeok did have a point. If the point was to separate them, the storms were definitely counterproductive.

Sanghyeok squeezed his hand, “Why don’t we test it? We continue our conversation, and if nothing happens, then the universe isn’t out to get us after all.”

“Okay…” Jihoon agreed hesitantly.

Sanghyeok squeezed Jihoon’s hand again, “Don’t be so worried. Nothing will happen.”

“Right.” Jihoon took a deep breath. Sanghyeok was right. It was too soon to jump to conclusions about anything. If the universe wanted to separate them, surely it would’ve just had them stranded from each other while they were rushing home in the storm? Or even magically made another room available for Jihoon to stay in?

“What were we talking about before we got interrupted?”

Jihoon couldn’t help but smile at the memory, “You told me you liked me back and then rejected me.”

“That’s- I didn’t- that’s not-” Sanghyeok sputtered, hiding his face in embarrassment, “You’re oversimplifying it. I just said I needed time to be sure about everything.”

“Sure about what?”

Sanghyeok groaned, peeking out from behind his hands, “I can’t think of a way to say it that doesn’t make me sound immature and childish.”

Jihoon nudged Sanghyeok, “But I like it when you sound immature and childish.”

“I need time to….” Sanghyeok grimaced as he turned the words over in his head, “I want to be completely sure that it’ll work out. I want to be sure you like me enough that your soulmate will truly not be a factor. See? That sounded ridiculous.”

Jihoon felt a spark of excitement, “So you saying you want me to show you how much I like you?”

“Well, that’s not exactly what I-”

Jihoon circled his arms around Sanghyeok’s waist and nuzzled against his neck, “Can I do this then?”

Sanghyeok gasped, a shudder that Jihoon was sure wasn’t from the cold running through his body. “I didn’t mean-”

“If you want to be sure of my feelings, doesn’t it make sense that I should be allowed to show how much I like you?” Jihoon reasoned, “If I wait patiently while keeping a distance, how can you ever be sure?”

“I know, but maybe not like…..I’m not sure. I just feel embarrassed.” Sanghyeok said in a frazzled voice.

“Embarrassed about what?” Jihoon asked.

Sanghyeok let out a short laugh, “I’m supposed to be the older one here, yet I’m the one that’s all unsure and awkward. Meanwhile, you seem so confident about it all.”

“It’s funny, the moment I realized you feel the same way all the nervousness faded away.” Jihoon said, “I think if you could hear any of the overthinking I did you wouldn’t feel so embarrassed about being unsure.”

“Maybe you can transcribe it for me someday.” Sanghyeok suggested.

Jihoon chuckled, “I can’t tell if you’re serious.”

Sanghyeok smiled, “Only halfway.”

“Is this okay then?” Jihoon squeezed Sanghyeok slightly, “Holding you like this?”

“Isn’t this because of the cold?” Sanghyeok pointed out.

“What about this then?” Jihoon nuzzled against the back of Sanghyeok’s neck again, breathing in his scent. “You smell nice. Can I say that too? Is that okay?”

“Y-Yeah…” Sanghyeok stiffened but didn’t flinch away from the feeling of Jihoon’s lips against the nape of his neck. When Jihoon spoke, he could feel Sanghyeok shiver from the sensation of lips moving against his skin.

Jihoon smiled, “And whenever I think you’re cute, can I say that too?

Sanghyeok relaxed into Jihoon’s touch, “If you want to.”

“You’re cute.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You didn’t need to.”

Sanghyeok rolled his eyes, “You’re ridiculous. Are you going to ask permission for everything?”

“Only the things I don’t already have permission to do,” Jihoon said, a playful smile on his face. He lifted Sanghyeok’s hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back of his hand, “Am I allowed to do that?”

Sanghyeok inhaled sharply, “Kissing? Or kissing my hand?”

“Mmm, I have to ask permission for every body part then?” Jihoon moved lower and brushed a kiss to Sanghyeok’s wrist, “Is this okay too?”

“I didn’t even answer the first question,” Sanghyeok stammered, sounding flustered.

“My bad.” Jihoon moved to kiss Sanghyeok’s hand again, this time on the palm, “Is this okay?”

“I-I thought you said you were going to wait for me to think things through?” Sanghyeok pointed out, still tripping over his words as he said them.

“I thought you wanted to be sure of my feelings?” Jihoon retorted playfully, “I’m just making sure you’re okay with how I intend to show how I feel. Shouldn't I know exactly what I’m allowed to do? Otherwise that puts me at a disadvantage.”

“You can do anything.” Sanghyeok mumbled.

Jihoon raised an eyebrow. “Anything.” he repeated.

“Within reason.” Sanghyeok amended quickly.

“I don’t know hyung,” Jihoon bit back a laugh, “I think our definitions of reasonable are very different at the moment.”

Sanghyeok stopped to think of a second. “I trust your judgement?” He said finally, the words sounding more like a question than a statement.

Jihoon raised an eyebrow, “Are you sure?”

“Since when did you get so bold?” Sanghyeok mumbled under his breath.

“I told you, now that I know you feel the same I don’t feel nervous at all.” Jihoon said sincerely, “I’ll do anything I can to show how much I like you and make sure this works out.”

“Well you can do that tomorrow then,” Sanghyeok huffed, “If you stress me out any more tonight I’m never going to fall asleep.”

Jihoon pouted, but shifted to allow Sanghyeok room to lay down, “Do I stress you out?”

“Elevated heart rate and anxiety are part of a stress response.” Sanghyeok said matter of factly.

“But calling my affection stressful is a bit mean, don’t you think hyung?” Jihoon whined.

Amusement flickered across Sanghyeok’s features, “Is it?”

Jihoon reached over to brush Sanghyeok's bangs out of his eyes, "Yes, but I forgive you because you're cute."

Sanghyeok rolled his eyes, taking his glasses off and handing them over to Jihoon, "I'm too old to be cute."

Jihoon opened his mouth to protest but Sanghyeok cut him off.

"We can argue about that one tomorrow. Come sleep with me."

Jihoon placed Sanghyeok's glasses onto the nightstand while trying his best to keep his thoughts in order. "Hyung, you can't say that." Jihoon managed to say with a halfway normal sounding voice.

"What did I say?" Sanghyeok looked up at Jihoon with a confused expression. Jihoon clicked off the lamp and plunged the room into darkness, worried that his sanity wouldn't stay intact if he stared back into Sanghyeok's too innocent eyes for any longer.

"You know that 'sleeping with' is slang for something else right?"

"Oh." Sanghyeok's embarrassment was palpable even in the darkness, "But I thought that was just a euphemism people used to be less crude. It doesn't mean that when used out of that sort of context right?"

Jihoon laid down next to Sanghyeok, wrapping one arm around him, "You know hyung, it's impressive how chronically offline you manage to be in this day and age."

"Surely when people hear the phrase 'sleep with' they think of actual sleep first? It only has the other meaning when given prelude right?"

The appalled tone of Sanghyeok's voice made Jihoon laugh. He snuggled closer and pulled the blankets securely over them. "Don't think about it too much hyung, you'll lose faith in our generation. Are you warm?"

"I don't think I'll feel completely warm for a while." Sanghyeok admitted.

Jihoon moved even closer, his chest pressed to Sanghyeok's back, "Warm enough to get some rest?"

"Maybe."

The sound of raindrops hitting the window was almost peaceful now. Or was it hail? Jihoon still couldn't really tell, but if Sanghyeok said it was hail then it was hail. Sanghyeok was still shivering and Jihoon held him tighter as if that would somehow force more heat into his body. He would be fine. It was just a little bit of a chill. Like Sanghyeok said, they were able to talk through their relationship without yet another freak weather event descending upon them. Perhaps the other two instances really were just coincidences. Jihoon closed his eyes and was relieved to feel the guilt and stress melt out of his body.

Accidents and coincidences, that was all it was.

Chapter End Notes

Late update I have no excuse but the apple game is consuming my life ._.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Smile!”

Jihoon obediently smiled for the camera. Warm sunlight washed over him and the air smelled fresh and fragrant. The gardens were so much more beautiful when the weather was nice. He should pick another one of those flowers he got from Sanghyeok last time. This time he would preserve it properly so it could last forever as a memory of their time together. Jihoon looked around to find the flowers only to be struck by the realization that he wasn’t able to see the garden he was sure he was standing in. Just a moment before, Jihoon was sure the flowers and the cobblestone paths were all there. Now that he looked for them, however, all he saw was a never-ending stretch of nothing.

“Jihoon, come on. Why don’t we go see the koi pond?”

Jihoon snapped his head around to stare at the source of the voice.

No.

His surroundings, the person in front of him, this feeling. It was a prophetic dream. Without thinking, Jihoon pinched himself harshly.

Wake up. Hurry.

“Isn’t it so beautiful?”

Jihoon opened his eyes again to see the faceless person still standing in front of him. This time they were already at the gazebo in the middle of the pond. Even if he couldn't see it, he could feel the wooden bench he was sitting on. His soulmate smiled at him and he was dismayed at the pang of longing that struck him in the heart. He wanted to enjoy this moment, to smile and laugh and hold his soulmate in his arms.

No.

Wake up.

You can't stay.

A gentle hand touched his face, "What are you thinking about?"

The hands were cold, and Jihoon couldn't stop himself from grasping them in his own to warm them up. The impulse was simply too strong to fight. Jihoon felt like he needed to take care of this person, like he needed to be close to them and make them laugh. Would it really be so bad to do those things in his dream? It was only a dream. It didn't mean anything. It wasn't real.

No.

He couldn't.

If he gave in so easily after promising Sanghyeok his heart yesterday, how could he face Sanghyeok in the morning? He needed to get out of here. He needed to wake up. He willed his hands to move, but they didn't budge. His body didn't seem to be under his control at all. His soulmate shifted closer and Jihoon happily wrapped one arm around their shoulders.

That was okay. An arm around his shoulders wasn't something too far from platonic affection. Jihoon would just have to live out this dream without doing anything too absurd. He could fight the temptation for just a little longer, even if he resented the fact that he felt

any temptation at all. This must've been the universe's purpose for the sudden power outage. Jihoon probably ran into his soulmate when he went downstairs to get the lamp. At the very least, it was somewhat comforting to know the power outage wasn't some attempt to freeze Sanghyeok to death.

"Thank you for today." His soulmate said warmly.

Jihoon flinched, "Uh, yeah. Sure."

"I have something for you too. Close your eyes."

Dread pooled in the pit of Jihoon's stomach as his body moved without his permission once again. He turned towards his soulmate and closed his eyes even as he internally screamed at himself to wake up. Soft lips pressed hesitantly against his and a fluttering feeling bloomed inside his chest, filling him with warmth and despair.

"Jihoon!"

Jihoon sat up with a gasp. The fluttering feeling quickly souring into a feeling of nausea until Jihoon felt like throwing up.

"Jihoon, are you okay?" Sanghyeok's concerned voice grounded him back in reality, "You were moving a lot in your sleep and it looked like you were having a nightmare."

"Yeah." Jihoon took a deep breath, "Bad dream. That's all."

Dim light filtered in through the window. The sky was still obscured by storm clouds and rain continued to fall steadily. The moderate amount of visibility indicated that it must be daytime despite how dark it still looked.

“Did you want to talk about your dream?” Sanghyeok asked. “You look really shaken up.”

Jihoon immediately felt guilty. Even if it was only a dream, it still felt…….wrong. Everything about it.

“I dreamed about my soulmate.” Jihoon admitted quietly, “I don’t want to hide that from you. I swear, as soon as I realized it was one of those special dreams I tried to force myself awake but nothing happened.”

“I believe you.” Sanghyeok assured him. Even through the forced smile, Jihoon could see the insecurity teeming under the surface.

“If you ever see me moving in my sleep just wake me up immediately,” Jihoon said, “I don’t want to stay in those dreams for any longer than I have to. Please.”

“Okay.” Sanghyeok agreed, still looking subdued, “These dreams, they’ll keep happening then?”

“Only when I run into my- when I run into that person. It must’ve happened when I went downstairs yesterday. If we just stay inside until we get back to Korea then it shouldn’t happen again.” Jihoon said firmly.

“Will we be able to go back?” Sanghyeok wondered.

“The storm can’t go on forever can it?” Jihoon said hopefully, “It’s already unprecedented that a storm this bad is happening at all.”

“I guess so.” Sanghyeok agreed. He hesitated for a moment before he spoke again, “These dreams, what are they like?”

Jihoon grimaced, “They’re……..unreal. Dreamy. Weird.”

“Very descriptive.” Sanghyeok teased.

“I don’t know how else to describe them,” Jihoon mumbled. He wasn’t about to say that it felt like meeting an angel in paradise. That would probably be the opposite of productive if he was going to convince Sanghyeok that he truly didn’t care about his soulmate.

“Do you know what he looks like?”

“Why do you want to know about him?” Jihoon asked, a hint of frustration tinting his voice, “He doesn’t matter. I haven’t met him. I don’t know him.”

“I’m just scoping out the competition,” Sanghyeok joked lightly.

Jihoon didn’t laugh. “There’s no competition. It’s only you.”

“I didn’t mean for you to take it so seriously, I’m sorry.” Sanghyeok leaned his head against Jihoon’s shoulder, “It’s just still difficult to believe.”

Jihoon melted at Sanghyeok’s touch. “I’ll make you believe it, no matter how long that takes.” he promised.

“About those dreams…..I just wanted to know what they’re like so I could think back to if I’ve ever had one.” Sanghyeok said, “If I have, doesn’t that mean I’ve met my soulmate before?”

“Yeah.”

Now that Jihoon thought about it, there was still a chance Sanghyeok would still find his soulmate. He didn’t even consider it since Sanghyeok had always acted like it was

impossible. Most people found their soulmate before the age of 30, but there have been instances of people that met them after that age too. Besides, Sanghyeok wasn't even 30 yet. Even by normal metrics, he could still very well run into his soulmate in the near future.

"Hyung." Jihoon said, getting Sanghyeok's attention again, "If it turns out you haven't met your soulmate yet, what happens then?"

Sanghyeok went silent. "The chances are low." He said finally.

"But not impossible."

"Not impossible." Sanghyeok agreed, "If that happens…..I don't know. I've never thought about it."

For the first time, Jihoon was starting to understand how Sanghyeok must be feeling. The thought that Sanghyeok's soulmate might still be out there waiting for him filled him with a mix of anger and insecurity. Whoever it was, Jihoon was sure he could be better for Sanghyeok than them. He was sure he would want Sanghyeok more and treat him better. Yet, he still felt a chilling fear that Sanghyeok would choose that other person anyway simply because they were his soulmate. Knowing that Sanghyeok might still meet his soulmate, did that change Jihoon's mind about being with him right now?

To his surprise, it didn't.

If anything, the threat of Sanghyeok's soulmate only made Jihoon want to try even harder. If he was able to cement himself in Sanghyeok's heart before he even met his soulmate, then Sanghyeok would be more likely to choose him in the end. He was willing to take that chance. He wasn't quite selfless enough to step aside and just let someone else have Sanghyeok just because they were given fate's blessing. He would fight for his right to stand next to Sanghyeok.

Part of him wished Sanghyeok would too. Why couldn't Sanghyeok be selfish too? Why couldn't he take the chance to win Jihoon's affection while his soulmate was out of the picture? With the way Sanghyeok was, it was uncharacteristic of him to back off for fear that

he might fail. His absolute stubbornness and burning ambition showed in his perseverance in the esports industry as well as in his performance on stage. Live or die, glory or devastation, he never backed down or looked away. If only that mindset applied to his personal life. Maybe that mindset *could* apply to his personal life, if only he allowed it to.

"Even if your soulmate is still out there waiting for you, I want to fight for you anyway." Jihoon said resolutely. "Isn't it better to take the chance while I have it instead of backing down because I'm scared I might fail?"

Sanghyeok's eyes widened, a million different emotions flickering through them. "I hadn't thought about it like that." he mumbled, sounding deep in thought. "Since when did I become afraid to take a chance…….?"

Jihoon itched to say something else, but didn't want to push Sanghyeok too much. He needed to be patient. "Are you feeling hungry?" Jihoon asked, changing the subject, "You didn't finish your food yesterday."

"Are *you* hungry?" Sanghyeok asked in return.

Jihoon raised an eyebrow, "If I say I'm hungry will you agree to eat?"

"But are you just saying it because you want me to eat, or because you're actually hungry?" Sanghyeok countered.

"Why can't you just say yes?" Jihoon grumbled, a slight pout on his face.

Sanghyeok laughed, eyes crinkling in the most adorable way, "Sorry, I just like it when you make that expression."

"Which one?" Jihoon huffed, still pouting.

“That one.” Sanghyeok said, fondness overflowing in his voice.

“What, so you act difficult on purpose to get a reaction out of me?” He asked incredulously, handing Sanghyeok his glasses and helping him out of bed,

“I didn’t say that.” Sanghyeok denied.

“You implied it.”

“Did I?” Sanghyeok said, acting aloof.

“So hyung likes acting like a brat on purpose then?” Jihoon teased, draping a jacket around Sanghyeok’s shoulders and adjusting the collar for him. His fingers brushed against Sanghyeok’s neck and Sanghyeok shivered slightly. Jihoon smiled, “What kind of reaction are you trying to get out of me with that kind of behavior hm?”

Sanghyeok suddenly looked very invested in fastening the buttons on his jacket, his ears turning red. “I wonder if they even have any food available with the power outage.” he stammered, clumsily strong-arming the direction of the conversation away from the previous topic.

Jihoon laughed out loud and Sanghyeok’s cheeks flushed a pretty shade of pink. Sanghyeok pulled the hood of his jacket over his head and opened the door, “Not a word.” he threatened half-heartedly.

“I didn’t say anything.” Jihoon responded cheerfully.

“You were thinking something.” Sanghyeok accused.

“Yeah, and what would that be?” Jihoon teased.

Sanghyeok turned around to give him a sulky glare, “You’re doing this on purpose.”

“What, flirting? Of course it’s on purpose, I’m in the process of courting you right now aren’t I?” Jihoon said playfully. He wasn’t sure where the confidence came from; Maybe the thought that Sanghyeok might have another person out there vying for his attention made Jihoon even bolder and more assertive.

It seemed like it was working too, if the blush on Sanghyeok’s face was any indication. Jihoon smiled to himself, maybe all this would work out even sooner than he thought. Even if he was willing to wait forever, the thought of being able to hold Sanghyeok’s hand *right now* filled him with inexplicable happiness. He let himself dream of taking Sanghyeok out on a date as soon as they get back to Korea, buying him flowers and then kissing him goodnight under the warm glow of the streetlamps.

Compared to the happiness of daydreaming like this, those dreams of his were nothing but a cheap imitation of true contentment. Jihoon didn’t need that fabricated paradise, he just needed Sanghyeok. Sanghyeok was real yet unreal, imperfectly perfect, painfully human yet bearing a quintessence even gods could not compete with. Looking at Sanghyeok now, Jihoon no longer felt apprehension or hesitation, only a steadfast determination to be the one worthy of standing by his side.

~

“Check.”

Jihoon panicked internally, staring in despair at the chessboard. What could he do? He moved his king and didn’t even have time to breathe before Sanghyeok moved his knight again.

“Check.”

“Again?” Jihoon whined, “How do I even win this?”

Sanghyeok tried to suppress a smile, “I can’t tell you that.”

Did that mean winning was possible then? Jihoon studied the board carefully before moving another piece. Sanghyeok followed suit immediately once again.

“Checkmate.”

“Really?” Jihoon glanced around the board to confirm that he had, in fact, just lost the game. He pouted, “Rematch. I’ll win this time.”

“I don’t doubt that, you’ve picked it up really quickly.” Sanghyeok praised. “Do you want to use the chess timer this time?”

“Sure.”

Turns out that was a bad decision. This time Jihoon didn’t even make it to checkmate before the clock ran out and declared him the loser. He sighed and glared at the timer app, “I swear I had more time left.”

“We can play again without the timer?” Sanghyeok offered.

Jihoon shook his head, “Let’s play something else. You have tft on your phone?”

“Of course.”

Jihoon seated himself next to Sanghyeok on the ground and looked over his shoulder to check Sanghyeok’s rank. “Climb quickly so we can queue together.” Jihoon urged.

“Coach me then.” Sanghyeok suggested, queueing into a game.

“Just play the meta and econ well.” Jihoon pointed at the screen, “Right here, sell those units to make ten.”

Sanghyeok frowned, “But what if I need them later?”

“You won’t.” Jihoon said flippantly, “Just force visionary here. You have the items for it.”

“But I don’t have Renata yet.” Sanghyeok pointed out.

“You can get Renata whenever, items matter more.”

“Really?”

Jihoon shrugged, “It’s still early, you have time to find your units. Slam shojin right now.”

“On Vex?”

“They give you item removers every stage now anyways. Just put it on her for now.”

Sanghyeok did a quick glance over the other teams, “Oh, I’m being contested.”

“Type ‘me renata no pivot’ in chat.” Jihoon advised, a cheeky smile on his face.

Sanghyeok rolled his eyes, “I’m not doing that. Can you even use the chat on mobile tft?”

Jihoon shrugged, “No clue.”

He focused back onto Sanghyeok’s screen and immediately panicked. “Wait, don’t roll right now!” Jihoon said quickly as soon as he saw Sanghyeok press the button.

“Why not?”

“You have to maintain econ.” Jihoon protested.

“But if I roll to zero and hit 3 star don’t I just win?”

“Yeah, but if you don’t hit then it’s doomed. Wait, don’t-”

“I hit it.” Sanghyeok turned to Jihoon with a smile that made him look like a smug cat.

“You’re so reckless.” Jihoon sighed, a fond smile on his face.

Sanghyeok won the game, watching the little number on the screen tick upwards with a small smile, “A few more of those and we’ll be able to duo.”

“You got this hyung!” Jihoon cheered, “Should I go get us some more food? They might still have rice balls left.”

“I’m not that hungry.” Sanghyeok said, eyes glued to his screen already.

“I’ll get you food anyways.”

“Why do you always ask if you’ve already made the decision?” Sanghyeok joked playfully.

“Because someday you’ll be craving something enough to actually ask for it and if I don’t ask then I won’t know.” Jihoon answered without hesitation.

Sanghyeok looked away in embarrassment, “You always have one of those ready don’t you?”

“One of what?”

“One of those…..” Sanghyeok gestured vaguely and glanced up at Jihoon before looking away again, “You know what I mean. Just go get the rice balls. I want a salmon one.”

“See? It’s paying off already.” Jihoon teased, “I’ll be back, don’t roll below 50 okay?”

“No promises.”

Jihoon ventured downstairs again, holding the lamp in front of him like he was some video game character. He could see several other lights floating around the lobby, no doubt other people wandering down in hopes of securing more food. Jihoon suddenly felt a stab of stress, lowering his eyes and walking faster. He should get the food and get back to the room as fast as possible. The last thing he wanted to do was run into his soulmate and suffer through another dream.

He grabbed a reasonable selection of food objects and waited impatiently to pay. He was waiting for the cashier to put his things in a bag when he heard the sound of whispering behind him.

“Hey, is that Chovy?”

“Really? He’s still in this hotel?”

“Isn’t this a good chance to talk to him since we’re all stuck here?”

Jihoon grimaced and took the bag from the cashier with a quick “thank you”. He clicked his lamp off and made a run for it before the people that spotted him could approach him. He did feel a little bad for avoiding fans, but this was probably the least convenient time to draw a crowd. Once he made it to the staircase he turned his lamp back on so that he wouldn’t trip over his feet on the way up.

“I’m back!” Jihoon greeted, “Did you win?”

Sanghyeok turned to him with a guilty expression and Jihoon laughed. Sanghyeok pouted, “I lowrolled.”

“Yeah? Did you also roll down to 0 at level 6 again?”

“Maybe.” Sanghyeok admitted, “So, what did they have left downstairs?”

“They had plenty of food left if you count packaged snacks as food.” Jihoon tossed Sanghyeok a rice ball and dumped the rest of the snacks onto the floor. There were several packaged cakes, chips, dried fruit, and some chocolate. “I also overheard them say that they were going to startup the backup generator in order to cook actual food tomorrow, so we just have to survive on this for tonight.”

“Any news on when the power is coming back?”

“Are you cold?” Jihoon immediately reached out to feel Sanghyeok’s hands. They felt cold as usual, but they weren’t stiff the way they were when the chill really reached his bones. He breathed a sigh of relief and pulled back.

Sanghyeok picked up the other rice ball and held it out towards Jihoon, “You worry too much. I was just curious about when the power was returning. I feel fine now.”

“Just making sure. Are you queueing again?”

“Of course. Now that you’re here to coach me I’ll win this time right?” Sanghyeok smiled playfully.

“You didn’t even listen to me last time.” Jihoon complained.

“Giving up on me already?”

“Fine,” Jihoon scooted closer so that he could see the screen, “Oooh take that augment. You can econ and go fast 8. Why are you still using the default river sprite?”

Sanghyeok tilted his head, “Why not? I think it’s cute.”

“Hyung, you literally have your own tft chibi. You have to use it.”

“Next game.”

They both sat on the floor staring at Sanghyeok’s phone screen, the pile of snacks in front of them slowly dwindling as the night dragged on. Jihoon quickly picked up the habit of holding pieces of food next to Sanghyeok’s mouth so that he could eat even with his fingers rapidly clicking and his eyes glued to the screen. The first time Jihoon did it Sanghyeok reeled back in surprise, but now he barely reacted when Jihoon prodded his lips with a stick of pocky, opening his mouth without breaking concentration for even a second.

The victory screen flashed and Sanghyeok broke out of his tft induced trance with a yawn. “Tired?” Jihoon said with a laugh, “Maybe it’s time to sleep.”

“If I play one more I’ll promote though.” Sanghyeok said, voice bordering on a whine.

“Or you’ll lose because you’re tired.” Jihoon said.

Sanghyeok set down his phone reluctantly, “Fine. Sleep then.”

“Do I get to cuddle you tonight or is that only for when you’re freezing to death?” Jihoon said half-jokingly.

Sanghyeok didn’t look at Jihoon as he took off his thicker outer layers and got ready for bed. Once again it was only the redness of his ears that gave away his embarrassment. “It gets cold at night.” Sanghyeok mumbled, still not looking at Jihoon.

Was that an invitation? It sounded like an invitation. Even in his eagerness, Jihoon could feel Sanghyeok’s awkwardness rubbing off on him. This was the first time that such physical closeness felt so intentional. Neither of them were asleep or freezing or otherwise incapacitated. There was no excuse to temper the embarrassment or disguise the intent, only the raw truth that they both simply wished to be close to each other. Considering the current ambiguity of their relationship, even that simple desire seemed unsound.

“It’s pretty cold.” Jihoon agreed, letting the feeble excuse hang in the air as he slipped under the covers alongside Sanghyeok. He cautiously wrapped one arm around Sanghyeok’s waist, “Is this okay?”

Sanghyeok shifted so that their bodies fit more comfortably against each other. “Would it be selfish if I said yes?” Sanghyeok said quietly.

“Why would that be selfish?” Jihoon said, confused.

“Jihoon-ah, what do you like about me?” Sanghyeok asked instead, ignoring Jihoon’s question.

Jihoon smiled, “Where should I start?”

Sanghyeok nudged Jihoon half heartedly, “I’m serious.”

“Well…” Jihoon contemplated his answer for a moment. What was the right response? Was there a correct response? Should he start with personality? Appearance? Character? Skill?

“I wasn’t joking when I asked where I should start.” Jihoon said finally, “There are so many things about you, from the most shallow of reasons to the most personal. How could I know where to start? Should I start by saying you’re talented and beautiful? Or should I praise the fact that you’re a genuinely good person with a genuinely open hearted outlook on life? There really are too many things to say. If you want a clear answer, I guess I would say it’s because you make me happy. I like you because you make me happy.”

Sanghyeok turned to face Jihoon. Even though they couldn’t see each other in the dark, Jihoon still felt his heart beat faster at the knowledge that Sanghyeok was looking his way. “Why do I make you happy?” Sanghyeok asked.

Jihoon felt his heart rate spike again, this time from anxiety. “I don’t know, you just-” Jihoon floundered to find the right words, “It feels good to be around you. It’s comfortable and I feel relaxed. You make me smile and I’m given the opportunity to make you smile.”

“Give me another answer,” Sanghyeok insisted. His hand moved to rest on Jihoon’s chest, “A more specific answer.”

“I-I don’t know,” Jihoon felt the panic fully set in now. His heart was beating so loudly he was sure Sanghyeok could feel it against his fingertips. He needed the right answer. Was there a right answer? What would happen if he answered wrong?

“When you’re happy I’m happy to see you happy. When you’re upset I’m grateful I get to be there for you. You’re thoughtful and whenever I notice the small things you do for me I feel light inside and I want that feeling to last forever.” Jihoon let his thoughts flow out of his mouth freely. If he spoke honestly, surely something he said would be correct?

“But…” Sanghyeok’s voice sounded frustrated, “I can’t- I don’t know how…..That doesn’t tell me how I should…….”

“What’s wrong?” Jihoon’s panic instantly gave way to a flood of concern when he detected distress in Sanghyeok’s voice, “Tell me what’s wrong hyung. Why are you suddenly asking these things? You know that if you need to be more certain about my feelings that I would be happy to tell you anything and reassure you a million times.”

Silence hung in the air. The darkness around them felt suffocating and Jihoon wanted nothing more than to turn the lamp back on to see Sanghyeok’s expression.

“I want to be selfish.” Sanghyeok said, so quietly that Jihoon barely registered the words. “I want to have you even if you were never destined to be mine. I want to know why you fell for me in the first place, so I can make you fall for me even more. I want you in the palm of my hand so that not even destiny has the power to take you away. I want to fight for you too.”

“I-“ Jihoon swallowed, his throat suddenly feeling dry.

Sanghyeok’s hand tugged lightly at Jihoon’s shirt, pulling him closer, “I’m not that selfless Jihoon-ah. I tried to be, I really did, but in the end…”

Sanghyeok leaned even closer, his lips brushing ever so slightly against Jihoon’s neck, “I don’t like to lose. I don’t like giving up on things I want. There’s a reason I’m the antagonist of every story, the villain standing at the end of every road. When I want things, I don’t care if they were meant for me or not.”

Jihoon tried to speak, a strangled noise coming out of his mouth instead. If he thought about it, that garbled imitation of human speech was about as coherent as his thoughts were. This was a side to Sanghyeok that caught him off guard.

“The problem is,” Sanghyeok’s voice was soft and composed, a tone that was supposed to be soothing yet somehow had the opposite effect on Jihoon, “Usually when I want something, I’m confident enough in my ability to obtain it. But this time, I feel as if I’m floundering in the dark to solve a puzzle I cannot see. I’m not certain I can win, no matter how hard I try. I’ve never felt that way before, and it scares me, so much so that I considered not trying at all.”

The feeling of Sanghyeok’s warm breath against his skin made Jihoon dizzy. It felt like he was drunk on Sanghyeok’s very presence. His soft words and even softer touch, it was all so intoxicating.

“Try anyways.” Jihoon breathed, finally finding it in him to form coherent words. He snaked his hand up Sanghyeok’s spine and to the nape of his neck, threading his fingers through Sanghyeok’s hair. Something about Sanghyeok’s roundabout confession lit a fire inside him. It was an opportunity, and Jihoon wasn’t about to give that up. He gripped Sanghyeok’s hair just enough to force him to tilt his head up towards Jihoon. Jihoon leaned in until he could see the faintest traces of Sanghyeok’s expression even through the pitch darkness. “Sanghyeok hyung,” Jihoon whispered, “You’re not a coward are you?”

Sanghyeok stiffened, disbelief seizing him for barely a moment before he regained control. He reached out to find Jihoon’s face in the dark. His fingers brushed delicately against Jihoon’s cheeks as his hands mapped out the planes of Jihoon’s face. “Tell me then,” Sanghyeok murmured, voice low and enchanting, “How do I make you like me more? How do I win?”

Jihoon’s breath hitched in his throat. A jumbled mess of panicked words was forced back down his throat by a sudden flare of competitiveness. He didn’t want to lose. He wasn’t sure exactly what it even meant to lose in this situation, but Jihoon refused to let it happen. Jihoon brushed a thumb across Sanghyeok’s cheek, “Why don’t you give it a try? It’s no fun if I give you all the answers.”

A firm hand landed on his chest and pushed him into his back. Jihoon could feel the press of cold fingers through his shirt, Sanghyeok’s grip surprisingly strong despite his small stature. “Why don’t you give me a hint?” Sanghyeok suggested, his voice light yet coercive. From where the sound was coming from, Sanghyeok must’ve been leaning over him. Jihoon swallowed nervously, hand itching to reach to the nightstand and turn the light back on. What would it feel like to see Sanghyeok looking down at him like this?

“Ah- I-” Jihoon struggled to form words as he frantically chased the image in his head away, “J-Just, do anything. Do anything and I’ll tell you if it’s working.”

Sanghyeok pressed harder down on Jihoon’s chest, hand moving upwards slightly.

“Is it working?” Sanghyeok asked, the innocuous sounding inquiry having an embarrassing effect on Jihoon’s heart.

Jihoon considered lying for a brief moment, but he was sure Sanghyeok could feel his heartbeat against his fingers. “Yes.” Jihoon said, voice coming out in a squeak.

“What do you like about this?” Sanghyeok continued, his voice keeping that unoffending tone of curiosity even as his actions expressed the opposite intensity, “Do you like that I’m being direct about how I feel? Or do you like that you successfully provoked me? Jihoon-ah, was this part of your plan?”

“N-No!” Jihoon stammered, “I didn’t think you would- I mean, it’s not that I don’t- I wasn’t…..I wasn’t prepared for this.”

The weight of Sanghyeok’s hand disappeared from his chest and Jihoon wasn’t sure if he was relieved to reacquire his sense of free will or disappointed to lose the feeling of Sanghyeok’s touch.

“You weren’t trying to get me to lose composure?” Sanghyeok asked again, sounding confused this time.

Jihoon pressed his hand to his chest, feeling his heartbeat slow down in real time. The sudden change in Sanghyeok’s behavior was giving him whiplash. “No? Why would I do that?” Jihoon asked, sounding equally confused.

“Ah, if I explain my thought process now I’m going to sound paranoid.” Sanghyeok mumbled, embarrassed, “Sorry about…..that. I just- I thought maybe- Nevermind. Sorry.”

“You can’t just introduce the topic and then say nevermind.” Jihoon whined, poking at Sanghyeok in an attempt to lighten up the mood, “Come on, I shared my paranoid theory that the universe was trying to freeze you to death didn’t I?”

“I suppose.” Sanghyeok relented, “It’s just….your sudden behavior……the….uh, you know……”

Jihoon raised an eyebrow, “The flirting?”

Sanghyeok cleared his throat awkwardly, “That. Yeah.”

“So you can pin me to the bed and force answers out of me but you’re too shy to say the word ‘flirting’?” Jihoon teased.

“Stop it.” Sanghyeok grumbled, “I just, I thought for sure you were doing it to get a reaction out of me. In a disingenuous way, like you were pretending. I thought maybe you were angry that I turned your initial confession down and tried to get back at me by catching me off guard with the sudden and blatant affection. Did you really not know how it all made me feel? Or were you just pretending to be oblivious? By overtly flirting you would push me to my breaking point and make it so you could know I like you more than you like me, that way the power dynamic would shift again and- I sound insane don’t I.”

“A little bit.” Jihoon said with a laugh, “I *was* trying to get you to like me more, but not for some convoluted ego trip. I like you and I want you to like me back. That’s all. My ego isn’t bruised because you told me you need time, and I would never be disingenuous with how I act.”

“So all that……you know……..”

“Flirting?” Jihoon supplied.

“Yeah.” Sanghyeok mumbled, “You seemed so unaffected and carefree by it all, giving me over the top compliments and offering affection like it was nothing. I was just afraid that maybe this didn’t have the same magnitude to you as it does for me.”

“That’s not true at all.” Jihoon said softly, “Before I knew you felt the same way, every small thing felt like the end of the word and I felt like my feelings were eating me alive from inside. But after everything, I could tell you were genuine with the things you said and it felt like a weight off my chest. That’s the only reason it might look so easy for me now, because I’m both confident in my own feelings and confident in yours.”

“I see.” Sanghyeok said, voice tinged with guilt, “I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

“That I’m not confident in your feelings the way you are in mine.”

“Don’t be silly hyung,” Jihoon reached out in the dark to pull Sanghyeok back down against his chest, “It’s my job to make sure you have no doubts about how I feel.”

Sanghyeok shifted closer and tucked his head under Jihoon’s chin, “That assessment is far too generous.”

Jihoon shrugged and wrapped one arm protectively around Sanghyeok, “I like it better when it’s in my hands anyway. I’ll try anything and everything I can. The fact that you’re open to accepting my feelings at all is enough for me.”

Sanghyeok laughed quietly, “You’re not real.”

“Sometimes I can’t believe you’re real either.” Jihoon said with a smile, “This still feels like a dream.”

“A dream huh?” Sanghyeok mumbled.

“A good dream.” Jihoon said, a sudden twinge of anxiety prickled at his conscience at the mention of dreams, “A real dream.”

“Do you…..dream of me too?” Sanghyeok asked hesitantly.

“Of course.”

“More than him?”

Jihoon felt guilt churn in his stomach, “Hyung….”

“Sorry.” Sanghyeok said immediately.

“I can’t control-”

“I know.” Sanghyeok interrupted, “That wasn’t fair of me to ask. Just……dream of me tonight? If you can? That sounds ridiculous…”

“Not at all.” Jihoon pressed a kiss to Sanghyeok’s forehead, “You’re the only thing on my mind, how could I not dream about you? Do you think you’ll dream of me too?”

Sanghyeok chuckled, “I dream about you every night.”

“Oh? You didn’t tell me that.”

“You didn’t tell me you dreamt of me either.”

“Fair enough.” Jihoon conceded, yawning.

“We should sleep. It’s been a long day.”

Jihoon didn’t argue, his eyelids falling closed already. “Goodnight hyung.” he mumbled. As darkness closed in around the edges of his consciousness, all he could do was pray that Sanghyeok was the one that showed up in his dreams tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I don't really have time to write long notes or reply to a lot of comments but I really really really appreciate every single comment, it never fails to make me feel warm and fuzzy inside c:

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunlight warmed his skin. It was a sensation unfamiliar but not unwelcome after the constant onslaught of rain. Maybe with the improved weather, he and Sanghyeok could finally have a proper outing together. Jihoon rolled onto his side and nudged the slumbering body next to him, “Hyung, the sun is out again.”

“Hm?”

Jihoon turned to check if Sanghyeok had opened his eyes yet, only to be met with an out of focus blur resembling a face. He could see the person next to him, yet he couldn’t. Jihoon jerked away from the person laying in bed with him, “Where is Sanghyeok hyung?”

Jihoon blinked. Once. Twice. Rubbing his eyes until he realized his vision wasn’t going to clear out.

“Jihoon, what’s wrong?”

A cold shiver ran across Jihoon’s skin. This was a dream. The exact type of dream he was praying he wouldn’t have. He tore his eyes away from the person, his *soulmate* , before the unrelenting need to touch him could take over. A glance around told Jihoon he was indeed trapped in another dream with his soulmate. Any attempt to focus on his surroundings produced nothing but an endless abyss of nothingness. He needed to wake up. Now.

“Jihoon.” A hand touched Jihoon’s arm and he felt the control he had over his own body wane.

Jihoon turned around and held his soulmate in his arms. “I’m fine.” His mouth said without his permission, “Go back to sleep.”

His soulmate's hand touched his face, “Are you sure? You’re acting strange.”

A mixture of desire and disgust pooled in Jihoon’s stomach, but his body automatically took his soulmate’s hand and kissed it. “You’re pretty.” Jihoon told the faceless stranger.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” His soulmate chided.

Jihoon felt his heart squeeze painfully. That was the kind of thing Sanghyeok would say in response to a compliment. For someone that received compliments so often, he was oddly bashful when accepting them, or maybe it depended on the nature of the compliment. After all, with how little Sanghyeok used social media, it wasn’t unlikely that he was oblivious to the overwhelming praise he received when it came to his appearance. Surely he knew to some extent even without reading comments from fans. Why else would brands be hiring him as a model left and right? The way he acted during the photoshoots too, the poses and expressions he made, all of that pointed to him being aware that he was attractive-

“What are you thinking about?” His soulmate’s voice cut rudely through his train of thought.

“Nothing.” Jihoon heard himself say in spite of all the rude remarks he tried to force out of his mouth. It seemed like he still couldn’t fully control himself in these dreams. This meant the only option was to wake up.

“It doesn’t seem like nothing.” His soulmate’s hand cupped his face, “What are you thinking about?”

Jihoon helplessly turned his head to look into his soulmate’s eyes. Effortlessly, he found the face to be beautiful without even seeing it. It took every ounce of the meager free will he was given not to lean in for a kiss. The more he stared, the more the blur of features seemed to become more clear. Pale skin, sharp and curious eyes, soft looking lips, well defined cheekbones….

His soulmate looked like Sanghyeok.

If Jihoon just pretended it was Sanghyeok he was embracing and longing to kiss, would he be able to forgive himself when he woke up? The memory of Sanghyeok's face, hesitant and afraid, flashed in his mind. Wasn't Sanghyeok scared of exactly this? Jihoon coming face to face with his soulmate and not being able to resist the pull of destiny? Jihoon raised his hand and reached out towards his soulmate. His soulmate smiled warmly back at him. His hand trembled as he willed it to stop moving. A moment before his hand could make contact with his soulmate's face, Jihoon somehow found the will to snatch his hand back. Not willing to risk staying for another second, he lifted his hand and slapped himself across the face.

Jihoon woke up with a gasp. The phantom pain still stung his cheek where he had slapped himself, but the pain was nothing in comparison to the overwhelming relief that cascaded over him. He was out. He made it. Jihoon buried his face in his hands and sighed. He never wanted to do that again. He must have run into his soulmate when he went downstairs to get food yesterday. This was probably the universe's intention with this whole blackout. How irritating. It was against Jihoon's nature to make Sanghyeok go get supplies alone, even if it was just downstairs, but if the alternative was to risk running into his soulmate again….

"Jihoon?"

"Sorry, did I wake you up?" Jihoon reached for Sanghyeok in the darkness, finding his hand with ease. Jihoon squeezed Sanghyeok's hand, but Sanghyeok didn't squeeze back. Silence hung over them and a feeling of unease crawled across Jihoon's skin. "Hyung?"

"Oh. Sorry." Sanghyeok mumbled, voice quiet, "Let's go back to sleep."

"Hyung, what's wrong?" Jihoon pressed, gripping onto Sanghyeok's hand tighter when he tried to pull away.

"It's….." Sanghyeok hesitated, "Ah, it's nothing."

"Obviously it's not nothing." Jihoon argued.

"It's nothing you should have to worry about." Sanghyeok said.

“Well I’m worrying already so you might as well tell me.” Jihoon insisted.

“It’s not fair to you.” Sanghyeok said quietly.

“You not telling me also isn’t fair to me.” Jihoon pointed out.

Sanghyeok went quiet and tried once again to pull his hand away from Jihoon, this time disguising it as an attempt to lay down. Jihoon followed him down, pinning Sanghyeok’s wrist against the mattress and caging him in with his arms.

“Hyung. Tell me.” Jihoon insisted.

“Jihoon-”

“Tell me.” Jihoon demanded again, “It’s it even more cruel to make me wonder?”

“I……I was worried that you dreamt about your soulmate again.” Sanghyeok admitted, “When you wake up suddenly like that, it’s because of your soulmate isn’t it?”

Jihoon flinched, “I did have one of those prophetic dreams, but that doesn’t mean anything. Nothing at all.”

Even though it was pitch black in the room, Jihoon was somehow sure that Sanghyeok was staring directly into his eyes. “So in the dream, you didn’t feel anything for your soulmate at all?”

The moment of hesitation that followed felt like an eternity. Jihoon didn’t mean to hesitate at all, but somehow his mouth wouldn’t form the words he wanted to say. Perhaps it was because he knew those words would be a lie.

“I told you it wasn’t fair to you for me to talk about this.” Sanghyeok mumbled, “I know you can’t control it. By talking about it, I’m only unfairly instilling a sense of guilt into you.”

The feeling of Sanghyeok once again trying to break free from Jihoon’s grip snapped him out of his hesitation. He tightened his grip and grit his teeth, “Nothing happened hyung, I swear. Even when I woke up in that dream, I was still thinking of you. He was right next to me and all I could think about was you. I-I can’t always control my body, but the only one in my mind is you. I promise. Please. Believe me. Please.”

“I believe you.” Sanghyeok said in a tone filled with stale comfort, “I told you, I don’t hold it against you at all.”

“You believe me, but it’s still hurting you.” Jihoon said, not budging from his position on top of Sanghyeok, “What can I say to make that pain go away? To make you feel safe and secure? You know it’s not something I can control, but it still affects your willingness to accept my feelings anyway. Am I right? What can I do to make that stop? How do I remove these doubts from your mind?”

“Jihoon…” Sanghyeok used his free hand to push at Jihoon’s chest, trying to dislodge him, “That’s something I need to work out mysel-”

Jihoon captured Sanghyeok’s free hand and pinned it to the mattress along with his other hand. “No.”

“Jihoon, let me-”

“No.” Jihoon leaned in until he was hovering over Sanghyeok, “If I sit back and let you work through it yourself and you decide that you don’t want to be with me, how can I accept that? How can I let you stew in your own thoughts when I know just how unreasonable you can be? How can I not fight?”

“What? I’m not-” Sanghyeok tripped over his words in his shock, “What do you mean?”

“You know hyung, for someone so smart you can be so incredibly stupid.” Jihoon said bluntly.

“Jihoon! You can’t-”

“I can hear your overthinking from all the way over here.” Jihoon interrupted, “You’re demoralized by the fact that I dreamt about my soulmate despite the fact that it felt more like a nightmare to me. You considered giving up again because you were scared of getting hurt. Am I right?”

Jihoon didn’t even wait for a response before he continued talking, “Do you even know how relieved I was to wake up? To escape? Do you know how I forced myself awake? I slapped myself so hard I could still feel it when I opened my eyes.”

“Jihoon.” Sanghyeok sounded calmer this time, “I’m sorry I worried you. It’s true that I overthink things, and you weren’t wrong about the things I was thinking. I won’t deny that I was tempted for a second to give up again for fear of being hurt, but I promise I won’t make impulsive decisions based on fleeting feelings. I….I do trust you. This doubt I’m feeling right now, I’ll try my best not to let it weigh on me.”

“Okay.” Jihoon said quietly, finally releasing Sanghyeok, “Sorry.”

Sanghyeok let out a gentle laugh, the sound warm and soothing, “Were you afraid I was going to run away?” he teased.

Jihoon pouted, “That’s a perfectly reasonable worry.”

“Jihoon, I can’t see.”

“I can’t see either,” Jihoon pointed out, “Which would make it even more difficult to find you if you ran.”

“I wasn’t going to run.”

“I’m not sure I believe you.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Only for you.”

Jihoon curled against Sanghyeok’s side, reaching in the darkness to locate his hands again. He held them gently this time, brushing a kiss against each of his wrists. “Does it hurt?” Jihoon asked, apologetic.

Sanghyeok hummed, “Not in a bad way.”

Jihoon raised an eyebrow, “It hurts in a good way then?”

“From your tone I can tell you’re insinuating something that I’m not picking up on.” Sanghyeok accused.

“Just a little bit.” Jihoon chuckled, nuzzling against Sanghyeok’s cheek, “Depending on what you let me do to you, maybe I can show you what I mean.”

“Show me?” Sanghyeok asked, voice half curious and half apprehensive.

“If you let me.” Jihoon said, trying his best not to sound too hopeful. He silently thanked the hours of research he did for enabling him to act as boldly as he wanted to. Maybe researching

such topics wasn't so presumptuous of him after all.

"When have I not let you do something?" Sanghyeok pointed out.

Jihoon swallowed, trying to ignore the way his heart was racing. "I haven't tried doing anything……like this. Yet. So I don't know if you'll let me or not."

"You won't know unless you try." Sanghyeok said, voice barely a whisper. "Besides, a distraction might be nice right now. Don't you think?"

"Hyung you know what you're asking me to do right now don't you." Jihoon forced himself to say. Patience was difficult to come by when Sanghyeok's words were reverberating in his head. A feeling of electricity flowed through his veins and prickled his skin, a feeling both painful and exhilarating.

"I think so." Sanghyeok said hesitantly. His voice quivered slightly and his body was unnaturally still next to Jihoon. Sanghyeok didn't move a muscle even when Jihoon leaned over him again, his breathing so shallow that it wasn't audible even in the dead silence.

"You won't regret it if you let me kiss you?" Jihoon breathed, voice trembling from his effort to rein back his desire.

Sanghyeok reached out to touch Jihoon's face, his breathing stuttering when he became aware of just how close Jihoon was. He retracted his hand like he had been burned, voice unsteady when he spoke again.

"I was going to let you kiss me that day in the rain anyway."

Fuck. Jihoon felt his heart lurch, the feeling violent and agonizing yet simultaneously filling him with an unbearable ecstasy. Every inch of his body ached with a foreign sensation, the feeling suffocating him until it hurt to breathe and not a thought could exist in his head besides the overwhelming urge to touch, to possess, to *consume* the man underneath him.

So this was what physical attraction felt like. Compared to this, his previous fixation with every facet of Sanghyeok's appearance seemed like something petty and insignificant. This was so much more yet, at the same time, so much less. The feeling was nothing as picturesque as an artist's obsession with his muse or a worshipper's devotion to their god. This desire was so grotesque in its simplicity that it could only be compared to a starving animal's desire to sate its hunger. There was nothing spiritual or transcendent about a desire so banal, so temporal in nature. Maybe that in and of itself made this desire—a desire so detached from that contrived sanctity humans glorified—a desire that was truly sweet with innocence and pure in its intrinsicality. Wasn't that, in its own way, something romantic?

So Jihoon kissed Sanghyeok.

The soft touch of their lips in the darkness was something instinctual yet disjointed in their inexperience. Sanghyeok pressed up against Jihoon and Jihoon pressed back as he were to devour him whole. Any traces of hesitation were washed away by a surge of dizzying desire. The open-mouthed kisses left their lips wet and skin hot. Sanghyeok's touch seemed to burn into Jihoon's skin and Jihoon held onto Sanghyeok like his life depended on it. Maybe it did. His hands moved from Sanghyeok's hair to his neck to his waist. No matter how desperately he grasped at Sanghyeok's body, it never seemed to sate the burning need tearing at his throat and twisting in his stomach. Jihoon grabbed a fistful and Sanghyeok's hair and tugged on it roughly, taking advantage of the pained gasp to press his tongue into Sanghyeok's mouth.

Jihoon's teeth caught on Sanghyeok's lip as he pulled back, drawing a soft whimper from the swollen lips. Jihoon kissed eagerly down the curve of Sanghyeok's throat, sucking harshly on the delicate skin. Sanghyeok gasped again and dug his nails into Jihoon's arms. His hands scrabbled for purchase as Jihoon continued to kiss and bite down the column of his neck and to his collarbones. A particularly harsh bite sent Sanghyeok arching up against Jihoon, his nails now almost painful against Jihoon's skin.

"Hyung," Jihoon panted, "Can I turn the light on?"

"What?" Sanghyeok sounded disoriented, his breathing still heavy.

"The light." Jihoon pressed another kiss to Sanghyeok's collarbone, "I want to see you. I want to look at you."

“I-” Sanghyeok began to sound more lucid now, embarrassment creeping into his voice, “N-No, I don’t think I…..I’m not…….Ah, it’s too embarrassing, I can’t…….”

“Please?” Jihoon murmured sweetly, “I want to look at you. Can I?”

“I don’t think I can- If I see you I don’t think I could- I think it might kill me to look at you right now.” Sanghyeok muttered.

“Why is that?” Jihoon asked, voice still soft and sweet.

“You’re……very….very good…looking.” Sanghyeok mumbled, every word dripping with embarrassment despite how laughably innocent his statement was. “I don’t think my heart could take it.”

“Keep your eyes closed then.” Jihoon suggested in a teasing voice, “Or would you prefer I blindfolded you? Either way works for me as long as I still get to see your face.”

“Ah, why do you want to see me anyway?” Sanghyeok mumbled, still embarrassed. “There’s no point…”

“Because you’re pretty.” Jihoon peppered light kisses over Sanghyeok’s cheeks as he reached over to the nightstand to turn the lamp on. Blue light illuminated the room, casting an icy sheen over Sanghyeok’s pale skin. In this lighting, Jihoon could almost believe Sanghyeok wasn’t human at all. There was an ephemeral quality to the way the light caressed Sanghyeok’s skin. He was glowing. His kiss-bruised lips flushed a deep purple color in the light, each mark on his neck glowing that same violet hue. The marks stood out starkly against Sanghyeok’s pale skin, each bruise a smudge of paint and each bite mark a jagged stroke of ink.

“I was right.” Jihoon breathed, “You’re beautiful. So beautiful.”

The aching feeling thrummed in his fingers as he traced over the marks scattered down Sanghyeok's neck. Being able to finally look Sanghyeok in the eye sated one desire only to ignite an entirely new one. A new stab of want, sharp and hot, burned in Jihoon's stomach and down towards a problem he was trying his best to ignore up until now.

"You're staring."

The burning feeling flared up at the sound of Sanghyeok's breathless voice and Jihoon collapsed onto Sanghyeok from the sheer force of how much he needed something, *anything,* to relieve the painful ache coursing through his body. Jihoon pushed his face against the crook of Sanghyeok's neck again, his hands grabbing at Sanghyeok's shirt with a force that would probably leave the cotton irreparably damaged. His entire body trembled with effort as he narrowly resisted the urge to grind down against Sanghyeok's leg.

"A-Ah….Jihoon…." Sanghyeok gasped, clinging helplessly to the front of Jihoon's shirt as he sucked at the already bruised skin of Sanghyeok's neck.

Jihoon's entire body shuddered at the sound of Sanghyeok's trembling voice, "Fuck. Hyung, you can't- I'm so- God, I need to just-"

He grit his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut, hoping in vain that the feeling would pass.

"Jihoon?" Sanghyeok's hand touched his cheek, "Are you okay? Did….did I do something wrong?"

"God, no. Not even close." Jihoon gasped through gritted teeth. The all too innocent concern in Sanghyeok's voice was doing nothing to help his self control. The hesitance and insecurity still coloring Sanghyeok's voice was almost laughable considering it was taking every fiber of concentration in Jihoon's body to keep himself from rutting against Sanghyeok like some wild animal. "Hyung, you have no idea what you do to me. I'm going insane."

"I- what should I do then?" Sanghyeok sounded perplexed.

“Push me away?” Jihoon suggested, voice still strained, “Or slap me. Both of those are good options.”

“Why would I do that?” Sanghyeok sounded even more confused now.

“Hyung, do you have any idea how much I want to fuck you right now?” Jihoon spat through gritted teeth, “You’re overestimating my self-control if you think you can just lay there with your pretty face and lips and not have me desperate to-”

Jihoon broke off, swallowing the vulgar words threatening to spill from his mouth. The last thing he wanted to do was go into detail about all the indecent thoughts clawing at the insides of his brain.

“C-Can you?”

Jihoon felt his heart drop into his stomach, “What?”

Sanghyeok averted his eyes, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed, “You can k-keep going. If you want.”

If you want? *If you want?* Why was Sanghyeok speaking as if he didn’t hear a single thing Jihoon just said? If Jihoon weren’t so otherwise preoccupied, he might’ve laughed at just how absurd those words were.

“Hyung, you know what you’re giving me permission to do right?” Jihoon said carefully.

“I- well, I don’t know exactly how it works.…” Sanghyeok looked up at Jihoon with hopeful eyes, “Do you?”

Jihoon swallowed, a sudden rush of nervousness cutting through the fog of arousal, “Yeah. I think so. I mean, I haven’t done it but- I’ve….read about it. Watched things.”

Curiosity sparked in Sanghyeok's eyes, "Yeah?"

"You know, just in case…" Jihoon felt his face grow warm with embarrassment, "I didn't want to be unprepared. Or hurt you."

"Oh." Sanghyeok breathed, looking up at Jihoon with wonder in his eyes. "That's……. good. Then you know how…..?."

Jihoon hesitantly moved his hand downwards and fiddled with the hem of Sanghyeok's shirt, "Can I?"

"Y-Yeah…" Sanghyeok looked away again, blood rushing to his cheeks.

Jihoon carefully slipped his hands under Sanghyeok's shirt, running his fingers across his abdomen and up the sides of his waist. He was so small in Jihoon's hands. So delicate. Jihoon pushed the hem of Sanghyeok's shirt up, fascinated by the way his hand looked spread flat across Sanghyeok's stomach.

"Hyung, you're so small." Jihoon said in wonder.

"Ah, that's-" Sanghyeok looked embarrassed and tried to push his shirt back down. Jihoon caught Sanghyeok's hand before he could hide himself again, reveling in the way his fingers wrapped all the way around Sanghyeok's wrist.

"I like it." Jihoon murmured, releasing Sanghyeok's hand and continuing to push Sanghyeok's shirt up past his ribcage. "It's hot. I bet I could pick you up if I wanted to. What do you think hyung? Do you like that? I wonder how you would look in clothes that fit you properly…..maybe I should buy you something……"

"Stop staring, it's embarrassing," Sanghyeok mumbled.

“Am I not allowed to admire you?”

“There’s nothing to admire.”

“I think…” Jihoon leaned closer and trailed his hand down to tug at the waistband of Sanghyeok’s pants, “I think I should show you just how wrong you are about that.”

Sanghyeok shivered, looking up at Jihoon with dilated pupils. Despite his trembling, he didn’t try to shy away from Jihoon. Jihoon tugged Sanghyeok’s pants down just slightly, eyes catching onto the way Sanghyeok’s hip bones jutted out. He was sure his fingers would leave bruises against them at some point during the night. The image that thought conjured was almost enough to chase away the nervousness still lurking. He could imagine it, finger-like bruises blooming across Sanghyeok’s waist to complement the vivid bitemarks still decorating his neck.

A flash of red caught Jihoon’s eyes, and a realization sudden and crushing wiped his mind clean. Sanghyeok’s tattoo. It was on his waist, just below his waistband. How could he forget that? The slightest edge of a red letter peeked out from under Sanghyeok’s clothes and Jihoon felt all the boldness from before drain out of his body. The soulmark. What would it look like? What would it say? Even if it meant nothing, why did it still hurt to remember that it existed?

“Jihoon?” Sanghyeok caught onto the sudden shift in atmosphere. He lifted his head off the pillow and realization dawned on him when he saw where Jihoon was looking. “Oh. Right. I forgot that it was…..there. Do you……do you want to look at it?” Sanghyeok asked hesitantly.

Did Jihoon want to look at it? He wasn’t sure, but his body began moving on its own anyway. Whether he wanted to know or not, it felt as if he needed to see it.

Both of them were hesitant to breathe as Jihoon reached out to touch the fabric concealing the tattoo. Just the very edge of the tattoo was visible, the red hue vibrant despite barely a character being visible. Jihoon tugged the fabric down hesitantly and, for a moment, it felt as if the entire world stopped along with the beating of his heart.

The bright red script faded into a dusky orange, then a warm yellow, then green, blue, purple…..

Until every color of the rainbow shimmered and glowed under Jihoon's fingertips.

The world that fell apart around him just moments before began to rebuild itself piece by piece. His heart began beating anew, and even the air tasted sweeter when he remembered how to breathe it in. In this moment, nothing mattered, and everything mattered so, *so* much.

"How…." Sanghyeok was the first to break the silence, eyes wide as he stared in disbelief at the way his tattoo responded to Jihoon's touch, "But I thought you said……"

"It's you." Jihoon breathed, "Is it….is it really possible?"

"Y-You said-" Sanghyeok looked at the loss for words, "But you said you met him. How can it be me?"

Jihoon could barely register Sanghyeok's words over the rush of blood in his ears. Every dream, every moment, every memory was replaying all at once, all through this new lens of realization. Sanghyeok being destined for him, it was a possibility so impossible that he missed every clue the universe threw in his face and shoved down his throat. Even now it still seemed impossible. If it weren't for the letters still shimmering and glowing beneath his fingers, maybe Jihoon still wouldn't be able to believe it.

Yet there they were. The words, glittering with an iridescence of a thousand pearls, spelled out a simple yet fateful "Thank you."

"Hello, it's nice to meet you."

"Thank you."

Thank you.

Thank you?????? Really???

Not even a “thanks, you too”, or a “nice to meet you too”?

Sanghyeok jolted in surprise when Jihoon burst out laughing, covering his face with his hands and groaning. “Was that really the first thing I said to you? Really?” Jihoon lamented, “Why am I so awkward? I bet that was rude too. Who responds to a greeting with ‘thank you’? Maybe it’s a good thing you didn’t realize it was me back then. What a terrible first impression. I must’ve sounded so full of myself.”

“What are you talking about?” Sanghyeok said, baffled, “What does your tattoo say?”

Jihoon pulled up his sleeve to reveal the words that were once so offensive to him. Looking at his tattoo now, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of smugness. These words, these colors, they tied him to Sanghyeok in a way that no one else would be able to compete with. There was also a staggering feeling of relief. For all his confidence and bravado, perhaps he was more concerned about Sanghyeok’s soulmate than he wanted to believe. But none of that mattered now. It felt like, for the first time since Jihoon set eyes on Sanghyeok and thought him to be beautiful, things were truly simple and easy.

Sanghyeok must’ve felt the same way, because he reached for Jihoon the same time Jihoon reached out for him, their lips meeting in a kiss so achingly perfect that reality seemed to bend around their need to drink in the moment. Time felt as if it slowed down and the air in their lungs never seemed to run out. For all the relief and desperation thrumming under their skin, the kiss was almost chaste in its piousness.

Bzzzzt. Click.

“The lights- mmph!” Sanghyeok was cut off as Jihoon pushed him down and kissed him again. Sanghyeok turned his head and struggled to push Jihoon off of him, “The lights just

came back on! We should go see if the power is back everywhere else too."

"Come back here, I'm not done kissing you." Jihoon complained, holding Sanghyeok's face still and kissing him again.

Sanghyeok let Jihoon have his way for a few more seconds before shoving at his chest again, "We should go downstairs and check." He struggled to say in between the barrage of affection.

"Why are you trying to run away?" Jihoon whined.

"Shouldn't we check if the power's back for good?" Sanghyeok reasoned.

"No." Jihoon caressed Sanghyeok's cheek and kissed him again, "We can worry about that later. Oh wait-"

Jihoon jumped out of bed and walked over to the thermostat. The little screen lit up when he pressed a button this time, a small indicator telling him that the heating was on. Jihoon smiled, "There, now you won't be cold."

He clicked off the room light and the emergency lamp in favor of the lamp on the bedside table. The lamp cast a cozy glow over the bed, finally creating an atmosphere that could be called romantic. Jihoon slid back into bed, happy with the new ambiance. Sanghyeok welcomed him with a kiss. "What was all that for?" Sanghyeok questioned.

Jihoon kissed him back. "You've been cold ever since the power went out right? I just wanted to make sure you're comfortable."

"And the lights?" Sanghyeok added.

“Don’t you think the atmosphere is more romantic now?” Jihoon pointed out, “It’s too bright if all the lights are on, and the emergency lamp is too blue. The bedside lamp is a lot nicer, not as harsh.”

“What do we need a romantic atmosphere for?”

Jihoon laughed, nuzzling against Sanghyeok’s cheek, “We’re soulmates on vacation in China, sharing this fancy hotel bed. It feels a bit like a honeymoon doesn’t it? Why shouldn’t we make it romantic?”

The blush on Sanghyeok’s cheeks looked absolutely adorable in the warm lighting. Sanghyeok looked away nervously, “I see.”

“What, you don’t like it?” Jihoon teased, “You seemed pretty enthusiastic earlier. Why don’t we pick up where we left off?”

Sanghyeok flinched slightly when Jihoon slipped his hand under his shirt again. He didn’t shy away, however, instead reaching up to tug on Jihoon’s shirt, demanding another kiss. Jihoon happily obliged, kissing Sanghyeok slowly and sweetly while his hands roamed across Sanghyeok’s body. Jihoon hooked a finger onto the waistband of Sanghyeok’s pants and began to tug them down. Sanghyeok tensed in surprise, but any nervousness was quickly lost as Jihoon bit down on his lower lip. Sanghyeok let out a soft whimpering sound and Jihoon couldn’t help but grind down against his leg just to feel some sort of relief. Lust burned under his skin and crowded every coherent thought out of his mind. It felt as if he would go insane if he didn’t do something to appease it.

“Y-You said you know how….” Sanghyeok bit his lip nervously, “How all this works?”

The nervous look on Sanghyeok’s face grounded Jihoon and he somehow found the willpower to pull away. “In theory. I’ve never actually done this with anyone.”

Sanghyeok’s nails dug into the back of Jihoon’s neck, a flash of possessiveness flitting through his eyes, “Good.”

Jihoon felt oddly smug from the show of possessiveness. He dipped down to press a quick kiss to Sanghyeok's lips, "Wait here, I'll see if I can find something we can use for, uh, you know."

Rifling through the bathroom drawers, Jihoon unearthed a tube of lotion. It wasn't ideal, but it was likely the best they were going to get. Sanghyeok glanced nervously at the tube Jihoon held as he climbed back into bed. Jihoon squeezed a dollop of the lotion into his hand. It was thick and vaguely clear with no discernable scent. It would have to do. Jihoon leaned over Sanghyeok, giving his pants an impatient tug, "Take these off."

Sanghyeok obeyed without complaint, eyes widening slightly as he watched Jihoon pull his shirt over his head. Jihoon set his sights on Sanghyeok's shirt next, all but tearing it off of Sanghyeok in his impatience. He climbed on top of Sanghyeok and kissed him gently, rubbing his hands up and down the curve of Sanghyeok's waist until he finally relaxed. Jihoon pulled away just enough to maneuver the tube of lotion into his hand again. "Relax okay?" Jihoon murmured against Sanghyeok's lips, warming the lotion in his hand before pressing a finger against Sanghyeok's entrance.

Sanghyeok gasped and tensed immediately. Jihoon peppered kisses across Sanghyeok's face, trying his best to distract him, "Hyung, you have to relax, remember? Take a deep breath. I'll go slow. I won't hurt you."

"Okay." Sanghyeok said, voice barely audible.

"Do you want another distraction?" Jihoon murmured in a low voice. With his free hand, he reached down and grasped Sanghyeok's cock. Sanghyeok jerked under him, a strangled moan falling from his lips. He immediately shut his mouth, looking mortified. Jihoon chuckled, kissing down Sanghyeok's neck and to his chest as he continued to stroke him slowly. It wasn't long until Sanghyeok gave up on staying quiet and collapsed back onto the pillow with a needy whine. Jihoon took that as his cue to push his finger in fully. Sanghyeok tensed a little again, but relaxed almost immediately this time.

"You're doing so well." Jihoon praised, "Does it feel good?"

“Y-Yes..” Sanghyeok whimpered, eyes glazed over with pleasure.

“I’m going to add another finger okay?”

“Ah- you don’t- have to- say it out loud,” Sanghyeok gasped, “It’s- embarrassing.”

Jihoon raked his eyes over Sanghyeok’s disheveled appearance, a smile playing across his lips, “You’re cute.”

“I’m not- ah!” Sanghyeok broke off as Jihoon pushed another finger into him. “Ngh….how is it so……..ah, it feels…..strange……”

Jihoon flexed his fingers, slowly working Sanghyeok open, “Does it hurt?”

“Mmmm, maybe a little.” Sanghyeok mumbled, eyes still unfocused from the unfamiliar sensations seizing his body.

“And now?” Jihoon pushed his fingers deeper, curling them slightly in search for the bundle of nerves that was sure to override any pain Sanghyeok was feeling.

“Ah, it…..burns……..a little….” Sanghyeok squirmed from the discomfort, lifting his head to see what Jihoon was doing, “But it’s not-”

Sanghyeok’s body jerked violently, a gasp catching in his throat and his head falling back onto the pillow with a thump. His fingers dug into Jihoon’s shoulders and a high pitched whimper resonated in his throat. “Ah, that….oh god. Jihoon, that feels- ngh….please….please……ah, keep going…….”

The string of pleas continued to fall from Sanghyeok’s lips and Jihoon found himself drunk on every sound and word he drew out of Sanghyeok. He pushed a third finger in but Sanghyeok didn’t even seem to notice. His eyes were glazed over and his tongue struggled to

produce any word that wasn't Jihoon's name. Jihoon found himself entranced by the expression on Sanghyeok's face, the way Sanghyeok moaned his name embedding itself permanently in his consciousness.

"Jihoon…….I can't- I'm gonna-" Sanghyeok inhaled sharply, biting harshly down on his bottom lip in an attempt to stay quiet as Jihoon worked him over the edge. The feeling of Sanghyeok squeezing around his fingers sent a jolt of pleasure through his body. Drinking in the sight in front of him– the look of pure bliss on Sanghyeok's face, the sound of his broken moans, the feeling of his body trembling and shaking– Jihoon grinded himself again Sanghyeok, feeling the pleasure in the pit of his stomach grow until flashes of white danced in his vision and his mind went blank. He was only vaguely aware of the warmth spilling over his fingers and pooling in his stomach as a dizzying lethargy descended over him.

A pained whimper brought him back to reality. Sanghyeok laid underneath him, looking completely exhausted and spent. With no other sensations to distract him now, his face was contorted in pain and discomfort.

"Hyung, are you okay?" Jihoon fretted, trying his best to be gentle as he pulled his fingers out. Sanghyeok winced and nodded.

"It's just, ah, sensitive." Sanghyeok said with another wince, he glanced down at the mess smeared across his stomach and flushed with embarrassment, "I-I'll clean that up. It didn't get on the sheets did it?"

Jihoon gently pushed Sanghyeok back down, "Don't be silly, I'll get you cleaned up. Rest."

Sanghyeok looked like he wanted to protest, but his next attempt to sit up resulted in another wince of pain. He gave up and laid back down, eyes fluttering closed. Jihoon made his way to the bathroom and soaked a washcloth in warm water, making quick work of cleaning himself up and discarding his probably unsalvageable underwear. If he weren't so focused on getting back to Sanghyeok, he might've felt a little bit of shame for having come in his pants like some horny teenager. He pulled on a clean change of clothing and filled a basin halfway with warm water.

Sanghyeok was passed out when Jihoon reemerged from the bathroom. He carefully wiped Sanghyeok down, trying his best not to wake him up. With Sanghyeok asleep and unable to

shy away from Jihoon's gaze out of embarrassment, Jihoon finally had time to fully admire Sanghyeok's body. His pale skin looked a lot healthier when bathed in the warm and luxurious hotel lighting. His legs were long and slender, complimenting the graceful curve of his waist. With a waist like that, how was it possible for anyone to resist wanting to grab it? Maybe that was why Sanghyeok never wore clothing that actually fit him, it would lower the productivity of everyone in his immediate vicinity by at least 20% if he dressed in proper clothes.

"Jihoon?" Sanghyeok mumbled groggily.

"I'm here." Jihoon responded, putting aside the washbasin and joining Sanghyeok in bed, "How are you feeling?"

"Sleepy." Sanghyeok mumbled, burrowing into Jihoon's arms. "And sore."

Jihoon kissed Sanghyeok's forehead, "Sorry my love. I was as gentle as I could be."

"S'okay," Sanghyeok mumbled sleepily, "It's good pain."

Jihoon bit back a laugh, "Good pain huh? I'll keep that in mind."

Sanghyeok mumbled something Jihoon couldn't quite hear before going still again. Jihoon brushed the hair out of his face and kissed him on the forehead. "Goodnight hyung, sleep well."

He reached over to the nightstand and turned the lamp off. Sanghyeok stayed asleep even as Jihoon maneuvered him into his arms like an oversized stuffed animal. Once Sanghyeok was secure in his arms, Jihoon finally closed his eyes. For the first time in what felt like months, he slept soundly and dreamlessly.

Chapter End Notes

Flying to Korea just so I can more accurately describe the experience of setting eyes on Jihoon/Sanghyeok (jk but if I do meet them while I'm there it WILL influence my writing)

I hope you enjoyed this chapter as much as I didn't enjoy editing it! Secondhand embarrassment hits like a brick but it's the price I willingly pay c:

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Good morning, beautiful.”

“No.” Sanghyeok grumbled sleepily.

Jihoon stroked Sanghyeok’s hair with a smile, “How are you feeling hyung?”

Sanghyeok blinked blearily, staring at Jihoon while the question registered in his head. Jihoon could see the realization happen in real time. Sanghyeok’s eyes widened and his face immediately turned a pleasant shade of pink. He pulled the blankets tighter around himself and looked up with a mortified expression, “Did I- Oh my god. And you’re- We’re- How come you’re fully dressed and I’m-”

Sanghyeok broke off and hid his face against Jihoon’s chest. Jihoon laughed and kissed Sanghyeok on the forehead. “Don’t tell me you’re having regrets already?” He teased.

“You know that’s not why.” Sanghyeok grumbled, “It’s just embarrassing waking up like this when you’re already looking like……that.”

Jihoon tilted his head, “What do you mean?”

“Dressed.”

Jihoon’s hopeful expression turned into a pout. “Hyung….” he whined.

Sanghyeok finally smiled, amusement joining embarrassment on his face, “And also handsome of course.” he praised, “It’s hard to believe you just woke up.”

Jihoon beamed, “You think I’m handsome?”

“Everyone thinks you’re handsome.” Sanghyeok said evasively.

“Hyung~” Jihoon whined, “You can’t take the compliment back. Call me handsome again.”

“Get me a change of clothes and I’ll think about it.”

“Hmmm,” Jihoon pretended to think about it before tackling Sanghyeok onto the bed, “No, I don’t think I will. You look good like this.”

Sanghyeok yelped as he was pushed onto his back, grimacing in pain. Jihoon jerked back in panic, “Did I hurt you? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just…” Sanghyeok looked embarrassed again, “A little sensitive.”

“That might be my fault.” Jihoon laughed, not an ounce of remorse on his face, “I think I got just a little too impatient yesterday. It’s okay, I’ll be prepared next time. Although, it seemed like you still enjoyed yourself….”

“Wait. Yesterday I passed out immediately after……uh, everything. Then what about you?” Sanghyeok looked up at Jihoon with a genuinely distraught expression, “You didn’t…….?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Jihoon laughed, “It’s enough for me to make sure you enjoy yourself.”

Sanghyeok frowned, “But-”

“You’re cute.” Jihoon said, kissing Sanghyeok on the nose, “You don’t have to worry about me. I definitely would’ve hurt you if I tried anything more than what I already did. Besides, I did actually, um…” Jihoon felt his face grow warm, “I did….get there. Mostly just from watching you. So you don’t have to worry about that part.”

“Oh.” Sanghyeok’s face was beginning to resemble a tomato.

Jihoon nuzzled into the crook of Sanghyeok’s neck, breathing in his scent, “You’re just too pretty. Your face, your voice…….you don’t even have to do anything and you’d drive me crazy.”

Sanghyeok squirmed under Jihoon’s touch, trying to push him away, “But it just feels….isn’t unfair if I don’t….”

Jihoon let Sanghyeok push him off, staring back at Sanghyeok’s embarrassed expression with a curious look, “If you don’t….?”

“You know…” Sanghyeok mumbled, avoiding Jihoon’s gaze.

“Mmmm I don’t think I do.” Jihoon said, admiring the rosy flush of Sanghyeok’s cheeks. He looked extra pretty like this, stripped of all composure and warm from Jihoon’s touch.

“I just feel like..” Sanghyeok bit his lip and Jihoon’s eyes tracked the motion hungrily, “Shouldn’t I…..return the favor?”

Jihoon couldn’t help but roll his eyes, leaning in to kiss Sanghyeok, “Don’t be silly. You say that like I didn’t enjoy yesterday just as much as you did. You don’t have to feel obligated to do anything in return. Even if you did nothing but lay there looking pretty I think that would be enough for me.”

Sanghyeok pouted, finally looking Jihoon in the eye again. There was a challenging glint in his eyes when he spoke again. “Close your eyes.” Sanghyeok said, gaze unflinching and tone leaving no room for argument. When Lee Sanghyeok himself gave an order like that, Jihoon doubted there was a single soul that could deny him. Jihoon closed his eyes.

“On your back.” Sanghyeok ordered, his voice somehow gentle while still sounding commanding.

Jihoon reluctantly climbed off of Sanghyeok and laid back down on the bed. He felt the telltale movement of Sanghyeok climbing on top of him and itched to open his eyes just to check if he was right.

“Eyes closed.” Sanghyeok reminded as if he knew exactly what Jihoon was thinking.

Jihoon obediently kept his eyes closed even as he felt hesitant fingers tug at the waistband of his pants. Blood immediately rushed downwards, a thousand different fantasies playing in his head all at once. Desire and curiosity pushed back against his instinct to obey Sanghyeok. He wanted to see, to look, to admire, but if Sanghyeok told him he couldn’t……..In the end, Sanghyeok’s word was law. Jihoon swallowed his curiosity and lifted his hips to let Sanghyeok tug his pants down more easily. Even without seeing Sanghyeok’s face, his nervousness was palpable in the slight tremble of his fingers as they drifted down Jihoon’s abdomen. The voice of chivalry at the back of his head urged him to tell Sanghyeok that he didn’t need to do anything if he wasn’t ready, to assure him once again that all this was unnecessary. If only Jihoon was anywhere near that virtuous.

He didn’t move or speak or even breathe as Sanghyeok’s fingers drifted lower with agonizing sluggishness. Whatever idea seized Sanghyeok’s mind, as unnecessary as it truly was, Jihoon was curious to see it play out in Sanghyeok actions. Although, “curious” was a generous word to use to describe the desire burning underneath Jihoon’s skin. The gentle press of Sanghyeok’s fingers against his lower abdomen felt like torture. If it weren’t for the weight of Sanghyeok’s words tying him down he would be tempted to move, to speak, to look. In this darkness, there was nothing that existed except the feeling of Sanghyeok’s fingers against his skin. It was all he could feel, all he could think about. It seemed like an eternity before those fingers finally moved to caress the aching *problem* that was getting more and more painful with every second.

Somehow, that all too gentle touch did nothing to relieve the agonizing desperation coursing through Jihoon's body. If anything, it only made it worse. Like the aroma of food to a starving man, it only made hunger gnaw more painfully at the already mangled remains of Jihoon's self-control. Jihoon squeezed his eyes shut and bit the inside of his cheek until the warm tang of blood touched his tongue. He needed to keep it together. With how pent up he felt, he was sure he would throw caution to the wind if he let himself go even just a little. Somehow he was sure, with hardly an ounce of doubt, that Sanghyeok would let Jihoon indulge in his desires to his heart's content. Sanghyeok let Jihoon fuck him, goading Jihoon on with helpless whimpers and needy whines even though he had only the flimsy hotel lotion to ease the pain. If Sanghyeok, with his nonexistent sense of self-preservation, let himself lay at Jihoon's mercy, did Jihoon really have the self-restraint to say no?

Jihoon tensed as he felt Sanghyeok's hand fully wrap around his cock. Even without looking, Jihoon had stared at Sanghyeok's hands so often that the image in his head was as vivid as reality. He could imagine it with startling clarity. Sanghyeok's graceful fingers wrapping delicately around the base, pale and elegant as they administered a touch far too gentle to be anything but a tease. His skin, pale to the point of translucence, would display a network of veins drawn in delicate blues and purples running just under the surface. Every subtle flex of Sanghyeok's hands would emphasize their dexterity and highlight the grace and precision in which they moved even when hesitation was still palpable in his touch.

Jihoon painstakingly crafted every detail in his mind until it was no doubt a perfect parallel to reality, only for the image to fall apart instantly when the sensation of something hot and wet touched his skin. His eyes flew open in time to see Sanghyeok kiss the base of his cock, hesitating when he locked eyes with Jihoon. Jihoon felt like his brain was short-circuiting, the image before his eyes not fully registering in his mind. Emboldened by the expression of helpless lust written all over Jihoon's face, Sanghyeok broke eye contact and ran his tongue across the underside of Jihoon's cock, licking it from the base to the tip. He pressed his tongue against the head, eyes widening slightly when the probably unpleasant taste of precum touched his tongue.

It felt like an unseen force was pining Jihoon to the bed. His entire body was frozen as if moving would break the illusion and he would wake up from this fanciful dream. His eyes were fixed onto Sanghyeok's face, drinking in every detail his feeble human eyes permitted him to see. Jihoon watched through a lust filled haze as curiosity overtook nervousness on Sanghyeok's face. Sanghyeok kissed the tip of Jihoon's cock, the action almost innocent in its obscenity. His tongue darted out to taste his lips after, the glint of curiosity still swimming in his eyes as he licked his lips again.

The desire searing through Jihoon's veins made him dizzy with pain and ecstasy. It felt as if he would die if Sanghyeok touched him and he would die if Sanghyeok didn't. Either way, it

felt like an experience he wouldn't survive yet he couldn't survive without having. Perhaps existing in tandem with Sanghyeok was doomed to be this way. To love him, to desire him, was just something one had to sacrifice their entire being to do. Every inch of your body and shred of your soul, willingly offered to an entity too effervescent to be human yet far too beautiful to be god. A being in between heaven and earth. A being that was Lee Sanghyeok.

The spell that bound Jihoon's body in stasis melted away as Sanghyeok finally took Jihoon's cock into his mouth. The sight of those lips, wet with saliva and flushed red, stretching to fit around his cock hit Jihoon like the most potent drug. His hands flew to grip Sanghyeok's hair and his head fell backwards in a monet of pure ecstasy. Jihoon lifted his head from the pillow almost immediately, the brief second that Sanghyeok's face left his field of vision feeling like an eternity. Every ounce of pent of desire flowed freely now, impossible to contain with Sanghyeok looking like *that* right in front of him. His mouth was hot and wet, a sensation unlike anything Jihoon had ever felt before, a sensation that drove him mad and numbed his ability to think.

Jihoon tugged on Sanghyeok's hair as his hips bucked involuntarily. Sanghyeok jerked in surprise, his throat convulsing at the intrusion, but he made no move to fight against Jihoon's grip. Even as tears streamed down his face and he grew dizzy with hypoxia Sanghyeok stayed limp and compliant, letting Jihoon fuck into his mouth with the recklessness of a man consumed wholly and entirely by lust. Every strangled cry and whimper resonating in Sanghyeok's throat only egged Jihoon on further, the vibrations producing an impossibly euphoric sensation that shook him straight to his soul. The closer Jihoon got, the less and less his brain seemed to process the world around him. At the height of everything, it felt as if he and Sanghyeok were the only things that existed. The only things that mattered. The feeling of Sanghyeok's hair under his fingertips the only thing keeping him tethered to reality amidst the violent torrent of pleasure.

An overwhelming ecstasy crashed over him, pleasure washing over his skin and scorching its way through his veins. Broken moans cut through his muddled thoughts and it took far too long for Jihoon to realize that the sounds belonged to him. With the tension leaving his body, Jihoon suddenly felt weak and shaky. His limbs felt numb, his arms not responding even as he willed them to move. His brain took even longer to break free from the spell, only coming back to reality by the sound of Sanghyeok coughing.

"Oh shit," Jihoon sat up, cradling Sanghyeok's face in his hands, "Hyung, are you okay? I'm sorry, I didn't- Oh my god, what did I-"

His voice died in his throat as he watched Sanghyeok swallow with a grimace before coughing again. Sanghyeok leaned into Jihoon's touch and took a shaky breath. His cheeks were still stained with tears and his lips swollen from abuse. Even in his guilt, Jihoon couldn't help but find the sight beautiful.

"Are you okay?" Jihoon asked again, lifting Sanghyeok's chin and kissing the tears from his cheek, "I'm sorry my love, I got carried away. Did I hurt you?"

Sanghyeok met Jihoon's gaze and immediately turned away in embarrassment, "I-I'm fine." he mumbled, "Are…are you……was it….was it okay?"

Jihoon slumped against Sanghyeok with an incredulous laugh, "Hyung, I think you're drastically underestimating the effect you have on me."

"Oh." Sanghyeok breathed, having the audacity to sound relieved, "I-I'm glad that I could…..do it for you….I mean, um, anyway let's, uh, did you want to……..why don't we look to see if any of the airlines are up and running again? The storm seems to be less severe today."

Jihoon rested his head against Sanghyeok's shoulder, still feeling weak, "Give me a second. I'm still processing what happened."

"You're being dramatic." Sanghyeok said, sounding thoroughly embarrassed now, "It was just…..it was….I mean, since you also…it's not that big of a deal. Really."

Jihoon lifted his head from Sanghyeok's shoulder and stared at him like he was crazy, "You have no idea how big of a deal this is. You're…… *you* . And you just did…..…that. For me. It's unheard of. Blasphemous. Unreal. I-I'm still trying to wrap my head around it. I must be the luckiest man on earth."

"Stop," Sanghyeok mumbled, looking even more flustered now, "I'm really not as special as you seem to think."

“Don’t you dare.” Jihoon said defensively, “You’re…….you’re everything. Even before you were my soulmate, you were my idol, my motivation, my reason and purpose. As much as logic lets me face you without fear on stage, to treat you like any other person, this is completely different. It’s one thing for an arrogant human to challenge a deity, and a completely different thing for a worshipper to dare covet their god.”

Jihoon pulled Sanghyeok into his arms and held him with intimate possessiveness, “What kind of devotee am I, to reach out and covet you? What kind of arrogance must I have that I dare to hold you in my arms and dream of keeping you to myself?”

Sanghyeok made a contented humming sound, “Then what kind of god am I, so happy to be coveted by a human? So content to belong to him and only him? Don’t fret too much Jihoon-ah. What reason do you have to think of me as unattainable when I’m already yours?”

“Because you’re you.” Jihoon said, tightening his arms around Sanghyeok.

“What does that even mean?” Sanghyeok laughed.

“It means that everyone and their goddamn mother will constantly be trying to take you away from me.” Jihoon huffed.

“Is that so?” Sanghyeok’s voice was light and playful, “Will you chase them all off then?”

“Maybe I’ll just tie you up and keep you in my basement.” Jihoon grumbled.

“Oh?” Sanghyeok sounded amused, “As long as the internet connection is good I don’t think I would mind. My teammates might not be so happy about that arrangement however.”

“Fine.” Jihoon released Sanghyeok from his vice grip and pulled back just enough so he could kiss him, “I’ll just chase off all your suitors with a stick. Just wait until I start going to the gym, I’ll be able to fight off anyone that dares to look at you.”

Sanghyeok looped his arms around Jihoon's neck and kissed him sweetly, "I'll look forward to that then. In the meantime, Jeong Jihoon, will you go on a date with me?"

"What? I was supposed to be the one to ask you out first." Jihoon whined, "That's not fair, you caught me off guard. I call for a remake."

Sanghyeok kissed Jihoon again, a smile on his lips, "Not my fault you were too slow."

"Fine, but don't you dare be the first to propose." Jihoon threatened, "I get to do that one."

"Thinking of marriage already?" Sanghyeok teased.

"I'm thinking of kids already," Jihoon teased in return, although he was only half joking.

"Oh?"

Jihoon nuzzled against Sanghyeok's cheek, "Mhm, you'll be the one to carry the child of course."

"That's not how it works." Sanghyeok pointed out, raising an eyebrow.

Jihoon shrugged, "I don't care. I'll get you pregnant anyway."

"You're ridiculous." Sanghyeok said with an amused smile.

"You're beautiful." Jihoon countered.

“Don’t change the subject.” Sanghyeok chided.

“Hmmm, but isn’t you being beautiful very relevant to my desire to get you pregnant?”

“Jihoon!” Sanghyeok had a scandalized look on his face, proof of his embarrassment already creeping across his skin.

Jihoon laughed and ducked out of the way as Sanghyeok tried to smack him. Sanghyeok glared at him, cheeks red and ears even redder, “Keep saying things like that and I’m leaving for Korea without you.”

“Why are you in such a rush to leave?” Jihoon wrapped an arm around Sanghyeok’s waist and pulled him back down onto the bed, “We’re on vacation aren’t we? Why don’t we enjoy it while it lasts? We have all the time in the world.”

“Maybe…” Sanghyeok relaxed in Jihoon’s arms, “You know, this still feels a bit unreal.”

Jihoon snorted, “ *You’re* saying that? I’m still convinced I’m about to wake up from a dream.”

Sanghyeok chuckled, “No more dreams for us.”

“No more dreams.” Jihoon agreed.

“Do you think you’ll miss it? Dreaming about me?” Sanghyeok wondered out loud.

“Why would I, when you’re right here in front of me? Even a second of this reality is worth more than a thousand dreams.”

Sanghyeok ducked his head, “You’re so cheesy.”

Jihoon smiled, “Only for you.”

“Good.” Sanghyeok snuggled against Jihoon’s chest and let out a happy sigh, “I love you.”

Jihoon squeezed Sanghyeok, feeling a warm feeling bloom in his chest, “I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who read this I'm still in shock at how positive the reception for this story was. It really is the enthusiasm and collective delusion that makes me motivated to keep writing. This is technically the final chapter, but the epilogue will have plenty of content I promise!

(btw I decided to condense the two epilogue chapters into one so it's just one chapter left~)

Epilogue: After “ever after”

Chapter Summary

Even after “happily ever after”, time continues to move forward.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“With that, T1 is eliminated from LCK summer 2024.”

~

“Hyung!”

Sanghyeok looked up in surprise when Jihoon barged into his room, “Jihoon? What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you.” Jihoon approached Sanghyeok half-nervously and took his hand, “Are you okay?”

“Of course.” Sanghyeok smiled, squeezing Jihoon’s hand, “Losses hurt, but there’s nothing I can do but learn from the past and look forward to the future. I’m used to this, you really don’t have to worry about me. Thank you for coming to check up on me anyway.”

“Well, I also missed you.” Jihoon said with a small smile, the brief awkwardness fading.

Sanghyeok waved at him to sit down on the bed. Jihoon sat down and pulled Sanghyeok into his lap, arms circling around his waist. “I never get to see you anymore.” Jihoon grumbled.

“We’ll have more time soon,” Sanghyeok reminded.

“That’s true.” Jihoon mumbled, resting his head on Sanghyeok’s shoulder.

Sanghyeok stroked his hair, “So, what’s on your mind?”

“Nothing.”

“You know by now that lying to me doesn’t work.” Sanghyeok chided.

Jihoon grumbled something to himself and squeezed Sanghyeok tighter, “I know. It’s just…….I don’t know.”

“If you don’t speak I’m going to assume you’re trying to break up with me.” Sanghyeok threatened light-heartedly.

“Hey!” Jihoon pouted, “Stop that. You can’t joke about leaving me, I’m gonna have a heart attack.”

“Tell me what’s wrong then.” Sanghyeok prodded.

Jihoon hid his face against Sanghyeok’s neck, “I’m a terrible person.”

“You’re not a terrible person.” Sanghyeok assured gently.

“I just……” Jihoon looked up at Sanghyeok, guilt plain on his face, “Part of me is just……I know it’s bad. And selfish. It’s just…….part of me is glad that I don’t have to face you in the finals.”

Sanghyeok laughed, “Is that all? It’s natural to feel a little relief, it doesn’t make you a bad person. Facing each other in a high stakes match is bound to be a little difficult.”

Jihoon bit his lip nervously, “But if it was us in the end, what would you do?”

“Well, if you ended up winning I would grieve the loss with my teammates as I always do. Then, at the end of the day, I’ll come home to you and be genuinely happy for you.” Sanghyeok said simply.

“You make it sound so easy.” Jihoon sighed, “Is it really that simple? How can you be sure?”

Sanghyeok rubbed Jihoon’s back comfortingly, “I’ve been doing this for a long time. I’ve suffered every defeat possible, and I can say with certainty that the feelings I feel won’t get in the way of my love for you.”

“I……” Jihoon felt guilt churn in his stomach, “What if……what if I can’t say the same? What if I can’t be certain?”

“You don’t have to be.” Sanghyeok pressed a kiss to Jihoon’s forehead, “I trust you. No matter how much time you need to process and grieve, I’ll always be waiting for you with open arms.”

~

That was what he said, but the reality hurt more than he expected.

Sanghyeok stood on stage, hundreds of people cheering his name. The joy he had been drunk on just moments before was beginning to subside, leaving all too much room for pondering. As Sanghyeok followed his teammates down the stage, he was struck with a pang of loneliness. Minseok and Minhyung walked side by side, stars in their eyes and adoration in

their smiles. Hyeonjun and Wooje followed not far behind, faces bright with laughter and excitement. Then there was Sanghyeok, walking alone down the stage towards their trophy. The road to greatness, did it always feel this lonely?

Now that everything was over, all Sanghyeok could think about was the expression on Jihoon's face as he walked off stage after the semifinals. That was the last time Sanghyeok saw him. Jihoon didn't look at him when he walked off stage. Sanghyeok suddenly itched to check his phone, which was still powered off and somewhere deep in his backpack. If he checked it, would he see a message from Jihoon? If he didn't, would he have the willpower not to call Jihoon begging for forgiveness? Forgiveness for what, he wasn't sure. In a way, maybe the red string tying them together was as cruel as it was beautiful.

"Sanghyeok hyung!"

Sanghyeok looked up to see his teammates gathered around the trophy, waiting for him with smiles on their faces. Sanghyeok couldn't help but return the smile, pushing his worries to the back of his mind and letting the roar of the crowd drown everything out.

~

Sanghyeok didn't turn his phone back on. He wasn't sure he wanted to. He wasn't sure if he could handle what he might see, or what he might not see. The bittersweet feeling returned as he watched his teammates pair off and return to their rooms, once again leaving him to walk alone. The day of celebration was almost enough to distract him from the hole in his chest. Sanghyeok knew more than anyone how much it hurt to fail, to fall short so close to the finish line. It took him years and years to learn how to process that pain productively, to not let it get to him. But Jihoon…….it was so easy to forget how young he still was amidst his talent and accomplishments.

How long would it take for Jihoon to feel okay again? Did he resent Sanghyeok for the part he played? Sanghyeok found himself terrified of the answer.

"CONGRATULATIONS!"

Sanghyeok froze at the doorway, stunned into silence. Right in front of him, standing in his hotel room, was Jihoon. Confetti rained down around them from the party popper Jihoon pulled. He was dressed up in a full suit, hair styled and makeup done. The entire room was decorated with candles and roses, casting a warm glow over Jihoon's smiling face. Jihoon's smile was more beautiful than all the roses in the room combined.

"Wha- why are you crying?" Jihoon's smile morphed into panic, "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Sanghyeok let himself fall into Jihoon's arms, body weak with relief. Tears continued to well up in his eyes but he didn't have the energy to feel embarrassed. "You're here."

"Of course I'm here." Jihoon said, hugging Sanghyeok, "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know." Sanghyeok mumbled.

"You're silly." Jihoon said with a laugh. He all but carried Sanghyeok to the bed, depositing him gently onto the mattress. Sanghyeok stared up at Jihoon in surprise. Jihoon stared back, expression reverent as he caressed Sanghyeok's cheek, "I love you. You know that right?"

"Yeah." Sanghyeok swallowed, feeling a lump in his throat, "I do."

"I love you more than life itself, more than I'm able to put into words."

Sanghyeok felt like crying again, "I-I know. I'm sorry."

Jihoon smiled, "Sorry for what?"

"For doubting you. For being scared."

Jihoon kissed Sanghyeok, slow and sweet. “Just don’t do it again,” he murmured, “and maybe I’ll forgive you.”

Sanghyeok smiled, “Maybe?”

“Maybe.”

Jihoon kissed Sanghyeok again, his hands threading themselves through Sanghyeok’s hair. Sanghyeok let himself enjoy the moment. The fear and uncertainty melted away under Jihoon’s touch, and Sanghyeok felt a sort of happiness he had never felt before. It was a happiness that was wholeheartedly complete. A happiness that warmed him from inside out and made every moment of strife a distant memory. When they laid together like this, tangled in each other’s arms, they were the center of their own universe. A universe where, in the past, present, and future, they were simply inevitable.

~ End ~

Bonus story:

“Stop pacing!” Hyeonjun grumbled.

Minhyung ignored him, continuing to rack up steps in his restlessness. Every few loops around the living room he would glance at his phone, sigh, and then continue to pace.

“Oh my god.” Hyeonjun groaned and sat up, “Can you please sit down? What are you nervous about anyway? Haven’t you been flirting with him for months now? You two don’t know the meaning of subtlety.”

Minhyung glanced nervously at his phone again, “Yeah, but this is the first time I’m meeting him in person. That’s completely different from talking online.”

“Bro, he’s joining the team just because you asked him to. Stop worrying about nothing. You two are grosser than an old married couple.”

“Does my hair look okay?” Minhyung asked.

Hyeonjun didn’t look up from his phone, “No, it looks dumb.”

Minhyung opened his mouth to return the insult, but a knock at the door interrupted him. Despite all his confidence, Minhyung found himself frozen with panic as he stared at the front door. Wooje jumped up from the couch to open the door before Minhyung could protest.

And there he was.

Minseok walked hesitantly into the room, greeting Wooje and glancing around until his eyes landed on Minhyung. A cheery smile broke across his face and before Minhyung knew it Minseok was across the room and launching himself into Minhyung’s arms. Minseok’s head thumped clumsily against Minhyung’s chest and his arms struggled to wrap all the way around Minhyung’s body. Minhyung was still frozen when Minseok pulled back and smiled up at him, “Hi!”

Minhyung didn’t respond, instead opting to stare blankly at Minseok’s face. His eyes were drawn to the beauty mark under Minseok’s eye, a mark that was surely hand drawn by the angels themselves before Minseok was sent down to earth. He was also so *small* . No pixels on a screen could be enough to prepare Minhyung for how that height difference made him feel. No camera did Minseok’s face justice. In a world where Minseok possessed any sort of hand-eye coordination, he would’ve made a good kpop idol.

Minseok poked Minhyung when he continued to stare in silence, “Minhyungie? Are you awake?”

“How is it possible you’re cuter in person?” Minhyung blurted. If the words were said with confidence instead of lovestruck awe, the line might’ve passed as being suave or charming. Instead, Minhyung must’ve sounded like an incorrigible simp. Minseok’s eyes widened and he stared at Minhyung in shock. It was his turn to be stunned to silence now, incapable of doing anything but stare. Minhyung frowned, did he say something wrong? There was no way Minseok was *that* shocked at the compliment. After all, Minhyung was definitely not stingy with compliments on a daily basis. Maybe because it was said in person this time?

“Minseokie?”

“You’re mine.” Minseok said, voice disbelieving.

“All yours.” Minhyung said with a grin, his demeanor all confidence and charisma now, “Your adc, your partner in crime, for as long as you’ll have me.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Look!” The shock on Minseok’s face morphed into excitement. He tugged the collar of his shirt down and stood on tiptoes to give Minhyung a better view, “Aren’t these words yours? Right? Yours are red and gold too right?”

Minhyung leaned down to read the script written across Minseok’s collarbone, his heart beating out of his chest. Sure enough, there they were, the compliment that had tumbled so clumsily out of Minhyung’s mouth just moments before. That meant.....

“Is this real?” Minhyung wondered out loud, “First the world’s greatest support joins my team, and then it turns out he’s my soulmate? I must have saved a dynasty in my previous life to deserve this.”

“Stop saying sappy things.” Minseok whined, smacking Minhyung, “Wait, does that mean your tattoo just says ‘hi’? But that’s so boring….Dammit, I should’ve said something more exciting when I walked in. How was I supposed to know that this would be the one greeting that mattered?”

Minhyung laughed, too drunk on happiness to even recall the grief his simple soulmark gave him in the past. He swept Minseok up in a hug, lifting him off the floor with ease and

spinning him around. “Do I get to take you on a date then? Tonight? After practice of course.” Minhyung asked, still smiling so wide that his cheeks hurt.

“I want to try this new burger place!” Minseok suggested immediately.

“Anything for you.” Minhyung said, still staring with shameless adoration.

A groan interrupted their moment of bliss and they both turned to see an annoyed Hyeonjun glaring at them, “Soulmates, really? You two are gonna be even more insufferable now. I’m stuck with this for a year?? If you two act like this all the time I’m never ganking bot ever again.”

Minhyung snickered, leaning down to whisper in Minseok’s ear, “He’s just saying that. The real reason he never ganks bot is because he wants an excuse to visit his boyfriend in top lane.”

“Not true.” Hyeonjun denied.

“What, so you don’t want to visit me in top lane?” Wooje chimed in with a pout.

“That’s not what I-” Hyeonjun groaned, “I hate you all. I’m going to go find Sanghyeok hyung.”

“Come back, we can go on a double date!”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I’m transferring to the LPL.”

~ End(again) ~

Chapter End Notes

Just a short excerpt I couldn't fit into the rest of the fic

On another note, help me decide what I should write next! I'm leaning towards either omegaverse or something that dips into darker themes. Omegaverse would be more angst/pining type while my other ideas depict toxic/obsessive dynamics alongside a darker setting. I have an unreal number of ideas swimming in my head and I have no idea which one to choose asdfgdhgjdfsaaakj

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